The Wreckers "The Melt" | Book #22
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The Wreckers "The Melt" | Book #22

by brentclarkpalmer

Summary

The found family travels deep into the frozen wilderness of northern Sweden for a strictly off-the-clock celebration of Tatum and Linnéa’s wedding at a breathtaking, temporary ice chapel. However, their peaceful arctic retreat is abruptly cut short when they encounter a chilling dynamic at a neighboring table: a wealthy woman systematically gaslighting and medically isolating her conservationist husband to steal his vast, ancient forest reserve in Lithuania. Unable to ignore the familiar architecture of a sterile, performative cage, the team instantly pivots from vacationers back to Wreckers. Blending the warmth of their newly cemented family ties with their signature tactical ruthlessness, they orchestrate a sprawling, surgical demolition across the Baltic to dismantle the wife's financial empire, free her captive husband, and protect a wild sanctuary from being destroyed.

Chapter 1

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter One "Impermanence"
The snow in Södermalm fell with a heavy, muffling quiet, coating the Stockholm streets in white and turning the large windows of the apartment into cold, glowing squares. Inside, the heat was turned up high, and the air smelled of cardamom and citrus.
Linnéa Bergström was currently upside down.
She held a perfect, frictionless handstand against the living room wall, her platinum blonde hair pooling on the hardwood floor. She was wearing nothing but oversized wool socks and a faded gray t-shirt, casually scrolling through her phone with one hand while the rest of her body maintained a suspension of gravity that belonged in the Los Angeles Olympics, not a Tuesday night in November.
From the deep green velvet sofa, Tatum Angstrom watched her.
Tatum sat perfectly still. She was a creature of profound, chosen silence, holding a mug of tea between both hands, letting the steam warm her face. Her stillness was not an absence of presence; it was an anchor. It was the heavy iron weight that kept Linnéa's chaotic, kinetic balloon from drifting off into the stratosphere.
For ten minutes, the only sounds in the room were the soft hiss of the radiators and the faint tap of Linnéa's thumb against her phone screen. They didn't need to speak to occupy the same room.
Tatum took a slow breath, her eyes tracking the sharp, athletic line of Linnéa's torso.
Her mind drifted, unbidden, to Boston. To Henrik Angstrom, the Brillo Pad heir, and the suffocating, manicured country-club nightmare of her first marriage. She remembered the heavy, ornate silver patterns that Henrik's mother had insisted on. She remembered the sheer terror Henrik exhibited whenever a schedule was altered, the frantic, red-faced need to control the logistics of every dinner party, every vacation, every breath Tatum took. In Boston, marriage was treated as an acquisition. You were bought, you were placed in a very expensive room, and you were expected to become a permanent, unchanging fixture.
Tatum had survived by playing furniture. She had weaponized her ability to be ignored, becoming so profoundly unremarkable that Henrik eventually forgot she had eyes, ears, and a pulse.
Then Linnéa had arrived in St. Moritz like a bright, chaotic grenade, and the vault had been blown wide open.
Linnéa dropped her legs, landing on her feet with a soft, feline thud that barely made a sound on the floorboards. She shook her hair out,

her chest rising and falling in an easy rhythm. She caught Tatum staring and offered a wicked, brilliant smile.
"What?" Linnéa asked, her thick Swedish accent wrapping around the word. "You're doing the quiet face. The one where you're solving a puzzle."
Tatum set her tea down on the low wooden table. She didn't move toward Linnéa. She just held the blonde woman's gaze from the sofa.
"I was thinking about Boston," Tatum said quietly.
Linnéa's smile vanished instantly. The kinetic energy shifted, hardening into something sharp and protective. She crossed the room in three strides, dropping onto the sofa beside Tatum, pulling her knees up.
"We don't think about Boston," Linnéa said, her voice dropping into a low, fierce register. "I will fly to Massachusetts right now and set a golf course on fire. Tell me which one."
A soft, genuine laugh escaped Tatum's throat. She reached out, tracing the line of Linnéa's jaw, her thumb brushing over the pulse point at her neck. Linnéa instantly leaned into the touch, the tension bleeding out of her shoulders.
"I don't want to set a golf course on fire," Tatum murmured. "I was just thinking about the silverware. How heavy it was. How it was designed to last for five hundred years, buried in a velvet box in a dining room nobody ever actually laughed in."
Linnéa watched her, waiting.
"I don't want anything permanent," Tatum said, her voice steady and clear. "I don't want a vault. I don't want a heavy ring that means I'm a fixture. I want a choice. I want something that I have to choose to keep alive every single day, or else it disappears."
Linnéa's blue eyes widened slightly. She sat very still—a rare, monumental effort for her—absorbing the sudden gravity in the room.
Tatum reached into the pocket of her soft cardigan. She didn't pull out a velvet box. She pulled out a simple, polished ring of hammered silver—light, imperfect, and warm from being held against her body.
"Marry me," Tatum said.
Linnéa stopped breathing. A sudden, ecstatic sound broke from her throat—a laugh that was half a sob. She launched herself across the cushions, knocking Tatum back into the velvet, burying her face in Tatum's neck, her arms wrapping around her like a vise.
"Yes," Linnéa breathed against her collarbone, her chaotic energy flooding back into the room. She pulled back just enough to frame Tatum's face in both hands, her eyes burning with a fierce, possessive clarity. "Yes. But we do it my way."
Tatum smiled up at her. "Your way?"
"I am going to overwrite Boston so completely you will forget how to

spell Massachusetts," Linnéa declared, her Swedish accent thickening with excitement. "No country clubs. No silverware. We go north. Two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle. Jukkasjärvi."
Tatum blinked. "The Icehotel."
"The ice chapel," Linnéa corrected, her thumb stroking Tatum's cheek. "Carved out of the Torne River. Lit by reindeer-skin fires. We say the words in a room made of frozen water, and in the spring, the walls melt. The chapel washes down the river and disappears into the earth. It won't exist a year from now. We won't be able to visit it on an anniversary. The only thing that lasts is the fact that we chose it while it was there."
Tatum stared at the bright, beautiful woman hovering above her. The metaphor was absolute. It was the violent, beautiful antithesis of Henrik Angstrom's vault. It was temporary, it was brutal, and it was entirely theirs.
"Okay," Tatum whispered. "We go north."
Four thousand miles away, in the Manhattan apartment, Vanessa Smart was holding a crystal glass of bourbon and listening to the speakerphone sitting on the marble kitchen island.
"January tenth," Tatum's voice floated out of the speaker, crisp and remarkably calm, though the faint sound of Linnéa doing what sounded like a victory lap around the Stockholm apartment echoed in the background. "We need the calendar cleared."
Vanessa leaned her hip against the counter. She wore a dark, heavy silk blouse, her auburn hair pinned up loosely. She possessed the cool, assessing gaze of an architect, but right now, her mouth was curved into a rare, unshielded smile.
"Who's the target?" Jordan Harlan asked from the armchair by the window.
Jordan sat with a book open on his lap, dressed in a soft charcoal sweater. He looked up, his dark eyes—with the faint silver at his temples—already calculating logistics. He was the brakeman, the structural engineer. If Tatum needed the calendar cleared, Jordan was already anticipating how to dismantle a target's infrastructure.
"No target," Tatum said.
A loud *crash* echoed from the Stockholm end of the line, followed by Linnéa swearing cheerfully in Swedish.
"I proposed," Tatum clarified. "She said yes. She is dragging us to an ice chapel in Northern Sweden to freeze to death."
Vanessa stood up straight. A genuine, startled laugh escaped her. "Tatum. Darling. That's brilliant."
"I've already booked the flights," Aiko Nakamura said.
Aiko had been sitting at the far end of the island, her dark hair sleek, tapping silently at a matte-black tablet. She hadn't looked up, her face

deadpan, but the itinerary was already routed and confirmed.
Vanessa stepped forward, leaning over the speaker. "Listen to me, Tatum. I am funding this. Every flight, every reindeer pelt, every ridiculous ice-carved suite. Do not argue with me. The Harlan-Smart Family Fund is paying for the wedding."
"Vanessa, you don't have to—"
"I insist," Vanessa said, her voice dropping into the warm, commanding tone she usually reserved for bending someone's reality. "It is a celebration. And more importantly, it is a strict vacation. No wrecks. We are going to drink champagne out of literal ice, eat cake, and watch you two be insufferably happy."
"Are you sure?" Tatum asked, amusement bleeding into her voice. "Put five of us in a room with a bunch of wealthy people who think they're untouchable, someone usually ends up bleeding out of their bank account."
"Lightning does not strike twice," Vanessa declared confidently, her parked age of thirty-two radiating a sophisticated hubris. "We emptied a house in Transylvania two weeks ago. We are off the clock. Jukkasjärvi is for champagne and cake."
"If you say so," Tatum said. "We'll see you in January."
The call clicked off.
The Manhattan apartment settled back into its comfortable, heavy silence. Outside, the New York traffic was a distant hum, but inside, the three of them existed in their own gravitational pull.
Aiko locked her tablet. She stood, picked up Vanessa’s bourbon glass from the counter, walked to the wet bar, and topped it off with two precise fingers of the amber liquid. She walked back and handed the glass to Vanessa.
"Thank you, Ma'am," Aiko said.
Her delivery was entirely flat, entirely respectful. It was the word a kept woman was forced to say, which Aiko had claimed and handed to Vanessa in Transylvania as a pure gift—the ultimate proof that being *chosen* was the opposite of being *kept*. It had become their steady rhythm over the last few weeks.
Vanessa took the glass, taking a slow sip. Her eyes flicked over the rim, sliding past Aiko to where Jordan was sitting in the armchair. He was watching the exchange, the corner of his mouth twitched in quiet, rumbling amusement.
Vanessa set the glass down on the marble. She reached out, adjusting the collar of Aiko's dark, minimalist sweater with casual, proprietary intimacy.
"I'm not a prima donna, Aiko," Vanessa murmured, her voice laced with dry humor. "You should also call Jordan 'Sir'."
Aiko didn't blink. Her terrifyingly analytical mind processed the

instruction in a fraction of a second. She turned her head slowly, looking across the room at the lethal, quiet man in the armchair.
Aiko held Jordan’s gaze.
"Sir," Aiko tested, her tone perfectly deadpan.
Jordan slowly closed his book. The amusement in his eyes deepened into something darker, something warm and intimately structural. He didn't answer right away. The quiet in the room stretched out, settling over the three of them, carrying the profound, unspoken weight of their family.
"Book the flights for the eighth, Aiko," Jordan finally said, his voice a low, steady rumble. "Let Vanessa have her vacation."

Chapter 2

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Two: "Minus Five Celsius"
Two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle, the world was stripped down to three essential elements: ice, darkness, and a cold so absolute it felt like a physical weight against the lungs.
The chartered transport slowed to a halt on the packed snow of Jukkasjärvi. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, but the polar night had already swallowed the sun, leaving the sky a bruised, bottomless indigo. Ahead of them, glowing with a faint, ethereal blue luminescence, sat the Icehotel.
It did not look like a building. It looked like an impossibility carved directly out of a glacier.
Linnéa Bergström was the first out of the vehicle. She didn't bother zipping her bright crimson parka, vibrating with the kind of kinetic bravado that made her entirely immune to the plunging temperature. She took a deep, theatrical breath of the minus-twenty-degree air, her platinum hair whipping around her face.
"Do you smell that?" Linnéa asked, spinning around, her boots crunching sharply on the snow. "Pine needles and absolute zero. It’s perfect. It smells like a fresh start."
Tatum stepped out behind her, a study in quiet endurance. Bundled tightly in a heavy wool coat, a thick scarf pulled up to her nose, she didn't share Linnéa’s ecstatic energy. But as she watched the blonde woman twirl under the sparse arctic stars, the corners of Tatum's eyes crinkled with warm amusement. She stepped forward and reached out, calmly zipping Linnéa’s parka all the way to her chin, anchoring the chaos with her profound stillness.
Aiko Nakamura emerged next. She wore a sleek, matte-black technical coat that looked designed for a high-altitude spacewalk. Her dark eyes immediately locked onto the facility, her analytical mind cataloging the cameras, the thermal sensors, and the physical density of the frozen Torne River water.
"There are no security cameras on the exterior," Aiko observed, her voice entirely deadpan. "Wiring the ice is a vulnerability. The heat from the electrical lines would cause a slow melt. Anyone could walk right in."
"Aiko, darling, no one is walking right in because anyone who isn't us is currently huddled by a radiator in Stockholm," Vanessa Smart said, stepping out of the warm interior of the transport.
Vanessa was wrapped in an absurdly expensive, floor-length charcoal cashmere coat. She moved with deliberate grace, her auburn hair

tucked beneath a dark fur hat. She possessed an assessing, sophisticated gaze, but the sudden bite of the wind made her pull the cashmere tighter around her throat.
"I am thirty-two years old," Vanessa announced to the frozen wilderness, leaning into her parked age with absolute authority. "And I have decided that if my eyelashes freeze together before we get inside, I am taking the plane back to Manhattan and celebrating your union from a bathtub."
Jordan Harlan stepped out last.
He didn't shiver. He wore a tailored, heavy wool overcoat, his dark hair catching the faint blue light of the hotel. He carried himself with quiet, lethal power, his eyes sweeping the perimeter out of pure instinct. He read the space seamlessly, noting the sightlines, the distance to the tree line, and the subtle currents of tension among the staff unloading bags near the entrance. He wasn't looking for a target; he was simply measuring the physical and social gravity of the environment.
Jordan picked up the heavy luggage effortlessly. He caught Aiko’s eye over the roof of the transport. Aiko gave him a brief, almost imperceptible nod.
"Sir," Aiko murmured, the word slipping out smooth and flat, a quiet continuation of the rhythm Vanessa had established back in the New York apartment.
The corner of Jordan’s mouth twitched, a flash of warm amusement breaking his steady composure. "Let's get inside before Vanessa realizes she actually hates the outdoors."
Inside the hotel, the temperature held at a permanent, precise minus-five degrees Celsius. Any warmer, and the walls would weep; any colder, and the guests wouldn't survive the night. The lobby was a vaulted cathedral of translucent ice, supported by massive, crystalline pillars. The only warmth came from the thick reindeer pelts draped over blocks of carved ice and the golden, recessed lighting glowing from beneath the floor.
Linnéa immediately approached the reception desk, her rapid-fire native Swedish eliciting genuine laughter from the clerks. Within three minutes, she had secured their room keys, a schedule for the chapel rehearsal, and what looked like an extra stack of thermal sleeping bags.
Vanessa merely observed the sheer, absurd artistry of it all, tracing a gloved hand along a perfectly smooth, frozen archway.
"It's entirely mad," Vanessa murmured to Tatum. "You're marrying a woman who brought us to a hotel that will literally run away into the river in four months."
"That's the point," Tatum said softly, her eyes resting on Linnéa. "It

doesn't trap you. You just get to be in it while it lasts."
Vanessa softened, touching Tatum's arm. "It is very beautiful, Tatum."
They moved to the Icebar to thaw—or at least, to pretend to.
The bar was a masterpiece of temporary design. The counter was a solid slab of river ice, glowing from within. Guests sat on massive cubes of ice covered in heavy animal skins. The drinks were served not in glass, but in hollowed-out cubes of pure Torne River water.
Aiko stood near a frozen pillar, sipping a vibrant red lingonberry cocktail. She silently noted that the bartender's register was hardwired to a local server—meaning the hotel's financial data was entirely accessible if one simply sat close enough to the router. She filed the information away purely out of habit.
Vanessa signaled the bartender, ordering another round. When the heavy, freezing cubes were slid across the ice counter, she picked hers up, the cold immediately seeping through her leather gloves.
She turned to the family.
"To Tatum and Linnéa," Vanessa said, her voice dropping into its warm, confiding register. "And to the finest, quietest, most unremarkable week of our lives. No ledgers. No leverage. I do not want to know who in this hotel is sleeping with their assistant, and I do not want to know who is hiding money in Zurich. We are off the clock."
"To champagne and frostbite," Linnéa cheered, clinking her ice-cube against Tatum's.
They drank. They were a found family, five people who had spent years destroying corrupt empires for sport, currently standing in a room made of frozen water, fiercely protecting the right of two of their own to simply be happy.
Jordan took a slow sip of his bourbon. He lowered the ice glass, leaning back against a reindeer pelt.
He let his gaze drift over the room. The Icebar was filling up with the kind of wealthy, insulated elite who could afford to fly to the edge of the earth to drink out of melting cups. He watched the subtle physics of the room—the way a wealthy patron leaned too heavily on a server, the forced, high-pitched laughter of a woman trying too hard to impress her dinner companions, the quiet friction of couples who had run out of things to say to each other.
It was a target-rich environment. But Jordan just took another slow sip of his bourbon, feeling the warmth of the alcohol hit his chest.
He looked back at his family. Linnéa was attempting to teach Aiko a Swedish drinking song, which Aiko was analyzing for its mathematical rhythm rather than singing. Tatum was laughing, a pure, unshielded sound that she had never once made in Boston. And Vanessa was watching them all, holding her ice glass like a scepter, looking

profoundly satisfied with the world she had curated.
For tonight, at least, Jordan decided to let the room spin on its own.
For tonight, the ice would just be ice.

Chapter 3

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Three: "Thermal Dynamics"
The Art Suite that Linnéa had booked for Vanessa and Jordan was designed to look like a Parisian parlor, which would have been elegant if the entire thing weren't carved from solid, frozen river water.
A massive, intricate ice chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling, catching the recessed floor lighting and throwing fractured blue prisms across the room. There was an ice fireplace with fake, glowing logs, an ice chaise lounge draped in thick reindeer pelts, and a king-sized bed consisting of a solid block of ice, topped with a mattress, more pelts, and a pair of expedition-grade thermal sleeping bags.
Linnéa Bergström threw herself backward onto the ice bed. She hit the mattress with a solid, unyielding *thud*.
"It doesn't bounce," Linnéa announced to the ceiling, her thick Swedish accent entirely unbothered by the physics of sleeping on a glacier. "But the pelts are incredibly soft. Tatum, come try it."
Tatum Angstrom stepped into the suite, pulling off her heavy gloves. She moved with quiet grace, her face relaxed and warm. She walked over to the bed, sitting gently on the edge, resting her hand on Linnéa's knee. Tatum didn't test the mattress; she simply anchored herself.
"It's perfect," Tatum said softly. She looked around the frozen parlor, her eyes lingering on an ornate, temporary ice clock carved into the wall. "Henrik would have hyperventilated in here."
"Because of the cold?" Linnéa asked, rolling onto her side to look at her partner.
"Because of the impermanence," Tatum corrected, her voice steady. She wasn't traumatized by the memory anymore; it was just a fact. "In Boston, everything was about preservation. He spent a fortune making sure the silver didn't tarnish, making sure the country-club memberships never lapsed, making sure my hair looked exactly the same for every single dinner party. He didn't actually look at me, of course. I was just part of the inventory. If he bought a room that melted into a river after four months, he would have felt like he was being robbed."
"Well, he is currently sitting in a very warm, very permanent house in Massachusetts, and we are sitting in a freezer," Vanessa Smart said, stepping into the suite.
Vanessa had refused to take off her charcoal cashmere coat. She drifted into the center of the room, her cool, assessing gaze taking in

the ice chandelier and the frozen fireplace. She looked incredibly expensive and entirely out of place, an aesthetic she carried with absolute, unapologetic authority.
"I am still thirty-two years old," Vanessa reminded them, stating her parked, perpetual age with utter conviction. "I possess a very specific skincare routine that relies heavily on a temperate climate. If I have to sleep in a mummy bag tonight, I expect to be served breakfast in bed. And I expect the coffee to be boiling."
"The thermal sleeping bags are rated for minus forty degrees Celsius," Aiko Nakamura said, walking through the doorway with her matte-black tablet tucked under one arm. She was dressed in sleek, minimalist layers of dark wool. "Assuming standard metabolic heat generation, the internal temperature of the bag will reach a perfectly comfortable level within twelve minutes of occupancy. However, the ambient room temperature will remain at minus five. I advise keeping your hat on."
"Thank you, Aiko, for that terrifyingly precise weather report," Vanessa sighed, sinking delicately onto the ice chaise lounge. The reindeer pelt swallowed her cashmere.
Jordan Harlan entered last, carrying a tray he had acquired from the warm, timber-built reception building across the compound. He didn't complain about the temperature. He moved with quiet, lethal confidence, setting the tray down on a small, round table carved from clear ice. The tray held five heavy crystal tumblers and a bottle of Yamazaki single malt that he had brought in his own luggage.
As he poured the amber liquid, Jordan read the room. He didn't look at the ice; he looked at the social physics of his family. He watched the easy, frictionless current of affection between Tatum and Linnéa. He tracked the quiet, gravitational pull of Vanessa commanding the chaise lounge, and the precise, observing orbit of Aiko standing near the doorway. It was a perfectly balanced system. There was no leverage to be pulled here, no tension to exploit—only the rare, grounding kinetic energy of people who didn't have to hide who they were.
Jordan picked up two glasses. He walked over to the chaise lounge, handing one to Vanessa.
She took it, her fingers brushing his. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"
"I enjoy seeing you outside of your comfort zone," Jordan murmured, his handsome features shifting into a faint, rumbling smile. "It builds character."
"I have enough character, Jordan. I want central heating."
Jordan turned and offered the second glass to Aiko.
Aiko looked at the amber liquid, then up at Jordan's calm, steady face. She reached out and took the tumbler.

"Thank you, Sir," Aiko said.
Her delivery was entirely flat, stripped of any inflection, delivered with the calm, sharp intelligence she applied to everything. It was a seamless continuation of the poly dynamic Vanessa had requested in Manhattan, a quiet acknowledgement of the hierarchy they freely chose with each other.
Jordan held her gaze for a second longer than necessary. The corners of his eyes crinkled. "You're welcome, Aiko."
Linnéa sat up on the ice bed, taking the tumbler Jordan handed her next. "So, what is the protocol for tonight? The rehearsal dinner is in the warm restaurant at seven. Do we dress up? Do we wear snow pants?"
"We dress," Vanessa decreed, taking a sip of the Yamazaki. The whiskey burned warmly down her throat, a stark contrast to the frozen air entering her lungs. "It is a celebration. We will put on real clothes, we will walk across the snow very quickly, and we will sit by the fire and eat whatever exotic local game they serve here."
"Reindeer," Aiko supplied helpfully, taking a precise sip of her drink.
Linnéa gasped, clutching her chest in mock horror. "You cannot eat the reindeer. They are magic. They pull the sleds."
"They are highly sustainable and locally sourced," Aiko countered deadpan.
"I'm with Linnéa," Tatum said, smiling softly into her glass. "I'm not eating Rudolph the night before my wedding."
"You will eat what is placed in front of you, and you will enjoy the fact that it is not being served on a five-hundred-year-old silver platter," Vanessa said, raising her glass in a lazy toast from the chaise lounge. "This is a strictly curated vacation. No targets. No unmaking people's lives. We are just five entirely normal, well-adjusted people having dinner."
Jordan took a slow sip of his own whiskey. He didn't point out the statistical improbability of the five of them making it through an entire dinner surrounded by the insulated, wealthy elite without finding a crack in someone's foundation. He simply let Vanessa enjoy her illusion.
"Normal," Jordan agreed, his low voice echoing slightly off the curved ice ceiling. "I'll wear a tie."

Chapter 4

Chapter Four: *"Overnight"

The heavy, insulated door of the ice suite closed behind Linnéa and Tatum with a soft, muffled click. They hadn't withdrawn out of some polite need to offer the room privacy; Linnéa had simply meant exactly what she said, dragging her bride off to survive the freezing temperatures with her own shamelessly direct, high-energy methods. Her departure took the chaotic kinetic energy out of the room, leaving a sudden, ringing quiet in the blue-lit parlor carved from frozen river water.

The ice chandelier threw fractured prisms across the walls. The fake logs in the ice fireplace glowed a steady, artificial orange. The air was dry and sharp at minus five degrees Celsius. Vanessa remained on the chaise lounge in her charcoal cashmere coat, one leg crossed over the other, the crystal tumbler of Yamazaki balanced on her knee. Jordan stood near the small ice table, still holding his own glass. Aiko remained standing near the doorway, tablet now tucked under her arm, her dark wool layers immaculate, her face composed.

Aiko looked at them both with the same flat, intelligent attention she applied to every variable.

“The ambient temperature will remain at minus five for the duration of the night,” she said. “The thermal sleeping bags are rated for minus forty, but their efficacy depends on minimizing heat loss through convection and radiation. The most efficient solution is maximal conductive transfer between bodies. Three people generate sufficient metabolic heat to create a localized thermal envelope under the pelts. Direct skin-to-skin contact reduces the surface area exposed to the cold air and allows heat to move from warmer regions to cooler ones at a rate far higher than fabric or air alone. Studies on mammalian huddling behavior show reductions in heat loss of up to fifty percent in clustered configurations. The smallest person should be positioned centrally to receive heat from both sides, but any arrangement that maximizes shared surface area will suffice. The pelts and unzipped sleeping bags will serve as additional insulation layers. Clothing should be removed to eliminate barriers to conduction.”

She delivered the entire explanation in the same calm, precise register she used when discussing flight paths or encryption protocols. No inflection. No pause for effect. Just data.

Jordan felt the shift in his body before he consciously registered it. The clinical precision of her words—*direct skin-to-skin contact*, *maximal conductive transfer*, *shared surface area*—landed with unexpected weight. His cock thickened against his thigh in a slow, heavy pulse, the fabric of his trousers suddenly too tight. He did not move. He simply let the reaction happen, the way he let every variable present itself before he acted on it. The contrast between Aiko's flat, scientific tone and the intimate reality of what she was describing made the erection almost immediate and almost absurdly complete. He was hard enough that the head pressed visibly against the front of his pants if anyone chose to look.

Vanessa chose to look. Her gaze dropped, lingered, then lifted again to his face. One corner of her mouth curved.

Aiko continued without acknowledging the physiological response she had just produced.

"Under the pelts, with bodies aligned in parallel or nested positions, core temperature can be maintained with minimal additional effort. The process is self-reinforcing once initiated. Arousal will further increase local blood flow and heat generation, though that is a secondary effect rather than the primary mechanism."

Jordan's cock gave another slow, hard throb at the word *arousal* delivered in that same deadpan voice. He set his glass down on the ice table with deliberate care.

Vanessa rose from the chaise lounge in one fluid motion, the cashmere coat falling open as she moved. She crossed to Aiko, stopped close enough that their breath mingled in the cold air, and reached up to touch the collar of Aiko's dark wool layer.

"Our little maiden has solved the thermal problem with characteristic elegance," Vanessa said, her voice low and warm. She brushed her thumb along the edge of Aiko's jaw. "Our clever little scientist. Our perfect little solution to the cold."

Aiko held her gaze without blinking. "The data supports the configuration."

Jordan stepped in behind Vanessa, close enough that she could feel the heat of his body even through the coat. His erection brushed against the back of her thigh through layers of fabric. He did not try to hide it.

“Then we should test the hypothesis,” he said.

Aiko nodded once. “Yes, Sir.”

They moved to the ice bed together.

The mattress on top of the solid ice block was firm, almost unyielding. The thick reindeer pelts were soft and heavy, already warm from the ambient heat of the room’s recessed lighting. The thermal sleeping bags lay unzipped and open like dark cocoons. They did not turn on additional lights. The blue prisms from the ice chandelier were enough.

Vanessa shrugged out of her cashmere coat and let it fall. She wore a thin black cashmere sweater and tailored trousers beneath. Jordan helped her with the sweater, his hands steady, his cock a heavy, insistent line against her hip as he worked. Aiko removed her own layers with the same precise efficiency she applied to everything—wool sweater, base layer, underthings—until she stood naked in the cold air. Her skin prickled immediately into gooseflesh. Her small, firm breasts tightened, dark nipples drawing into hard peaks. The flat plane of her stomach flexed with each breath. Between her thighs, the dark hair was already damp, the inner lips slightly swollen from the simple act of describing conductive heat transfer in clinical terms.

Jordan stripped without ceremony. His body was lean and strong, the silver at his temples catching the blue light. His cock stood thick and flushed, the head already glistening. He did not touch it. He simply let it be visible, let the evidence of what Aiko’s explanation had done to him stand between them.

Vanessa finished undressing last. Her taller frame, the generous curve of her hips, the full weight of her breasts, the dark auburn hair falling loose now across her shoulders. She shivered once as the cold air touched her, then stepped forward and pulled Aiko against her front, skin to skin, sharing heat immediately.

Aiko’s body was smaller, tighter, warmer than expected once pressed close. Her nipples brushed Vanessa’s breasts. Her hips fit neatly against Vanessa’s. She reached back without looking and found Jordan’s hand, guiding it to her waist, then lower, placing his palm over the curve of her ass.

“Ma’am,” Aiko said, voice still almost flat, “if you would lie on your back in the center. Sir, between my legs. The configuration maximizes shared surface area.”

They arranged themselves under the heavy pelts.

Vanessa lay on her back in the middle of the mattress. The pelts were pulled up over her shoulders, trapping the cold air beneath in a warm pocket. Aiko positioned herself on her side against Vanessa's right, one leg thrown over Vanessa's thigh, her small hand already sliding down Vanessa's stomach. Jordan moved between Aiko's thighs, his broad shoulders disappearing under the furs as he settled on his stomach. The pelts shifted and settled around them like a living thing, sealing in the heat.

The first touch was deliberate.

Jordan's mouth found Aiko's cunt with the same focused attention he brought to everything that mattered. He licked her slowly at first, broad strokes from entrance to clit, tasting the slickness that had already gathered there. Aiko's thighs tensed around his head. Her hips lifted once, then settled. Vanessa felt the movement through the shared pelts and smiled against Aiko's temple.

Aiko's hand found Vanessa's breast, thumb circling the nipple with scientific precision until it tightened. Her other hand slid lower, between Vanessa's legs, two fingers parting her and stroking with the same measured rhythm Jordan was using on her.

"The conductive transfer is already measurable," Aiko said, voice steady even as her breath hitched on the last word. "Sir, if you could —yes. There."

Jordan sealed his mouth over her clit and sucked gently. Aiko's back arched. Her fingers inside Vanessa curled. Vanessa gasped softly into the cold air above the pelts.

Aiko came the first time with almost no warning.

Her body locked, thighs trembling hard around Jordan's head, inner walls pulsing in strong, rhythmic contractions against his tongue. A rush of wetness coated his mouth. Her usually flat voice broke into a single, soft, involuntary sound—half gasp, half moan—before she caught it again. Her hips rolled once, twice, riding the aftershocks against his face. Jordan stayed with her, licking her through it, the taste of her sharp and clean and unmistakably Aiko.

When the tremors eased, Aiko's hand tightened on Vanessa's breast.

"Ma'am," she said, voice almost even again, "the heat retention is now

adequate on this side. Sir, if you would come up now."

Jordan rose over her under the pelts. His cock dragged along her inner thigh, hot and heavy. Aiko reached down, wrapped her small hand around him, and guided him to her entrance. She was slick enough that he slid in with one slow, deep thrust. Her body took him completely, tight and hot and still fluttering from the first orgasm. Jordan groaned low in his throat, the sound muffled by the furs. He held still for a moment, buried to the hilt, letting her adjust, letting the heat build between them.

Vanessa turned onto her side, facing them. She kissed Aiko's mouth, then lower, sucking one tight nipple while her hand slid down to where Jordan was inside her. She found Aiko's clit with her fingers and circled it in the same rhythm Jordan began to move—slow, deep strokes that rocked all three of them against the firm mattress.

Aiko came the second time with Jordan inside her.

Her body went rigid, then shook. Her inner walls clamped down around him in hard, milking pulses. Vanessa's fingers worked faster on Aiko's clit. She leaned close to Aiko's ear and murmured, low and velvet-rough, "Our little maiden we will show off at the wedding…"

Aiko's thighs locked around Jordan's hips. The sound she made this time was longer, a broken, gasping moan as the orgasm rolled through her in deep, rhythmic waves. Jordan felt every contraction, the way her body tried to pull him deeper, the fresh rush of slickness coating his cock. He held still through it, letting her come around him, his own breath harsh in the trapped air under the pelts.

When she softened, Aiko's hand found Vanessa's wrist.

"Ma'am," she said, voice husky now but still precise, "I want you on your back again. I will attend to you while Sir attends to me. The configuration remains optimal for heat retention."

They shifted.

Vanessa lay on her back once more. Aiko moved between her thighs this time, settling on her stomach with the same economical grace. Jordan positioned himself behind Aiko, on his knees, and slid back inside her in one smooth thrust. The new angle made Aiko gasp—deeper, the head of his cock dragging against the front wall of her cunt with every stroke. She lowered her mouth to Vanessa without hesitation.

The sounds under the pelts were wet and intimate: the slick slide of Jordan's cock in Aiko's cunt, the soft, focused sounds of Aiko's mouth on Vanessa, Vanessa's low, appreciative moans, the occasional creak of the mattress against the ice block beneath. The cold air above the furs was sharp; beneath them, the heat built steadily, skin sliding against skin, sweat beginning to gather at the small of Aiko's back, between Vanessa's breasts, along Jordan's spine.

Aiko came the third time with Jordan fucking her from behind and her mouth on Vanessa.

Her body locked again, harder this time. Her cunt spasmed around Jordan's cock in long, rhythmic pulses. Her thighs shook. She made a muffled, desperate sound against Vanessa's cunt as the orgasm tore through her, hips jerking back against Jordan's thrusts. Jordan gritted his teeth and held on, the tight, fluttering heat of her almost dragging him over the edge. He didn't come. He waited, buried deep, while Aiko shook through it.

When she lifted her head from Vanessa, her mouth was wet, her eyes dark and slightly unfocused for the first time all evening. She reached back with one hand and found Jordan's hip, stilling him.

"Sir," she said, voice rough, "I would like to change the configuration one final time. Ma'am on her back. I will straddle her. You behind me. I will provide for both of you now."

The shift happened smoothly under the pelts.

Vanessa lay on her back. Aiko straddled her hips, facing her, and lowered herself until their bodies pressed together from chest to cunt. Jordan moved behind Aiko, between both their spread thighs, and slid back inside Aiko's still-pulsing cunt with one long thrust. The new position pressed Aiko's clit directly against Vanessa's. Every time Jordan thrust, Aiko's body rocked forward, grinding against Vanessa's slick heat.

Aiko came again almost immediately—her fourth—shaking between them, cunt clamping around Jordan, clit throbbing against Vanessa's. She made no attempt to stay quiet this time. The sound was low and broken and unmistakably real.

Vanessa came next.

Aiko reached down between them, found Vanessa's clit with her fingers, and worked it with the same precise, relentless rhythm she

had used on everything else. Vanessa's back arched off the mattress. Her hands gripped Aiko's hips hard enough to leave marks. She came with a sharp, gasping cry, thighs locking around Aiko's, wetness flooding between them. Aiko kept her fingers moving through it, drawing it out, her own body still rocking with Jordan's steady thrusts.

Only then did Aiko turn her attention fully to Jordan.

She pushed up onto her hands, changing the angle so that every thrust of his cock dragged the head against her front wall again. She looked back over her shoulder at him, eyes dark, voice still trying for flat and failing beautifully.

"Sir," she said, "you may come now. I want to feel it."

Jordan's control broke on a low, rough groan. He fucked her harder, deeper, the pelts shifting around them, the mattress firm beneath. Aiko met every thrust, clenching around him, her body still fluttering from her own orgasms. When he came, it was hard and deep, pulsing inside her in long, hot spurts. Aiko stayed with him through it, rocking back, milking him with her body until he had nothing left.

They collapsed together in a tangle of limbs and pelts and shared heat.

The ice bed beneath the mattress was unyielding. The pelts were soft and heavy over them. The air above the furs was still cold enough to raise gooseflesh on any exposed skin, but beneath the covers their bodies had created a warm, humid pocket. Sweat cooled on skin. Breath fogged and dissipated. Jordan's cock softened slowly inside Aiko. Vanessa's hand rested on Aiko's back, stroking idle patterns.

Aiko lay between them, smaller body bracketed by theirs, her breathing gradually evening out. She did not move away. She simply stayed where she was, skin to skin, exactly as her own scientific explanation had recommended.

Vanessa pressed a slow kiss to Aiko's temple.

"Our little maiden we will show off at the wedding," she murmured, voice warm and satisfied. "Our clever girl. Look what you did for us."

Aiko's answer was almost too quiet to hear, but it was there, delivered in the same flat, precise register she had used for the thermodynamics.

"The configuration was optimal," she said.

Jordan laughed once, low and rough, and pulled the pelts higher over all three of them.

Outside, the frozen river continued its slow, inevitable melt. Inside the ice suite, three bodies generated more than enough heat to last until morning.

Chapter 5

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Five: "Social Gravity"
The traditional timber-built restaurant across the compound from the Icehotel was a sanctuary of heat, smelling richly of smoked birchwood, roasted root vegetables, and hot lingonberry jam. A massive stone hearth dominated the center of the dining room, radiating a fierce, localized warmth that offered a stark reprieve from the arctic night.
The rehearsal dinner was, entirely by design, a masterclass in conflicting social gravities.
They occupied a long, heavy oak table near the fire. On the left side sat Linnéa's biological family, a pocket of loud, joyous Swedish chaos. Her parents, Lars and Agneta, were already on their second round of aquavit, completely unbothered by the frozen wilderness outside. Next to them sat Freja, Linnéa's younger sister.
Jordan took a slow sip of his bourbon, his dark eyes resting briefly on Freja. Barely a year ago, they had pulled her out of a subterranean bio-monitored display case in London, her mind fractured by the Resonance Institute. Tonight, she was laughing so hard she had to lean against her new boyfriend, Oliver—a visibly out-of-his-depth but fiercely attentive VP at a Fortune 500 tech firm. Oliver was wearing a pristine, ultra-thin Silicon Valley tech-fleece vest over a designer henley, looking like he expected to pitch a startup in Palo Alto rather than survive a frozen tundra. He shivered every time someone opened the restaurant door, but he looked at Freja like she was the only light source in the room.
Jordan caught Aiko's eye across the table. Aiko had broken the conditioning that saved Freja's mind. She didn't smile, but she offered Jordan a faint, fractional nod. The Wreckers had built that joy. It was a tangible, living victory.
The right side of the table, however, was anchored by the stifling, manicured pressure of Boston.
Tatum's parents, Richard and Beatrice, sat with their spines perfectly straight, radiating stiff, East Coast disapproval at being forced to eat dinner in a wooden lodge instead of the dining room at the Ritz. Beside them sat Tatum's younger sister, Sloane.
Sloane was a masterpiece of status-obsessive anxiety. She was married to a hedge-fund manager named Preston, who had spent the first twenty minutes of dinner discreetly checking his phone under the table. Sloane viewed Tatum as the black sheep who had inexplicably thrown away the Brillo Pad fortune and the Angstrom family name,

and she had spent the entire trip delivering tiny, surgical microaggressions.
"It’s just very... rustic, Tatum," Sloane said, using her fork to push a piece of roasted char around her plate. She offered a tight, pitying smile. "I’m just surprised. After the reception Henrik threw for you at the club, this all feels a bit like a camping trip. But I suppose second weddings are meant to be understated."
Tatum sat perfectly still. Years ago, she would have survived the barb by playing furniture—shrinking down, becoming so remarkably unremarkable that the insult simply washed over her.
But Tatum didn't have to play furniture anymore. She had a buffer.
Vanessa Smart rested her elbow on the table. Her heavy outerwear had been relinquished to the cloakroom, leaving her in a deep burgundy silk blouse that caught the firelight. She turned her cool, assessing gaze onto Sloane. She didn't raise her voice; she merely adjusted the frequency of the conversation, actively isolating Sloane’s behavioral loop.
"Understated is such a fascinating word, Sloane," Vanessa hummed, offering a smile that was flawless, warm, and utterly lethal. "Because when I look at this room, I see a private estate two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle that requires a chartered transport to access. It is exclusive because it is entirely inaccessible to anyone who requires the artificial comfort of a country club to feel important."
Sloane blinked, a flush creeping up her neck. "I only meant—"
"The thermal dynamics of the ice chapel also prohibit the wearing of synthetic fibers," Aiko interjected. She didn't look up from her methodical dissection of a roasted potato. Her voice was flat and terrifyingly precise. "I noticed your coat in the cloakroom, Sloane. The poly-blend lining will freeze to your skin if the ambient moisture level rises above four percent. You may want to stand near the back."
Preston stopped checking his phone. Sloane’s mouth opened, closed, and she quickly took a sip of her water.
Tatum’s eyes crinkled. She leaned her shoulder against Linnéa’s, a frictionless, easy point of contact, completely protected by the family she had chosen.
Jordan watched the exchange with quiet satisfaction. He tracked the currents of tension at the table, feeling the social physics balance perfectly. His family was operating flawlessly.
"Richard! Beatrice!" Lars boomed across the centerpieces, raising a small, frosted glass. "You must try the aquavit. It puts fire in the blood! Much needed up here, eh?"
Richard Angstrom adjusted his cuffs, his smile tight and practiced. "Thank you, Lars, but I prefer to stick to my scotch. The peat agrees with me more than... whatever herbs are in that."

"Dill and caraway!" Agneta laughed, leaning comfortably against her husband. "Good for the digestion. Though Oliver here says it tastes like licorice soaked in gasoline."
Oliver flinched, adjusting the collar of his tech-fleece vest. "I just meant it has a very... robust flavor profile, Mrs. Bergström. Disruptive. In a good way."
Preston looked up from his phone for the first time in twenty minutes, his eyes narrowing as he sized Oliver up. "Disruptive? What's your vertical, Oliver? I don't think we caught your firm."
"Enterprise-level cloud integration," Oliver said, straightening up slightly. "VP of systems architecture. We're based in Palo Alto."
"Tech," Preston murmured, losing interest immediately. He tapped his phone screen again. "Right."
Sloane seized the opening to steer the conversation back to her preferred battlefield. "How fascinating. Mother, did you see the ice blocks they plan to use for seating tomorrow? I was telling Preston, it's certainly a... unique choice. Though one wonders what happens if the guests get frostbite during the vows. Henrik always made sure the climate control at the club was exactly seventy-two degrees."
Beatrice sighed softly, touching her pearls. "It is a very different aesthetic, Sloane. We're adjusting. Tatum has always been... adventurous." The word *adventurous* hung in the air, dripping with the implication of foolishness. Beatrice turned her polite, unblinking gaze to Linnéa's mother. "Tell me, Agneta, do you have many relatives making the trek up to this... remote location?"
"Oh, half of Stockholm!" Agneta said, entirely immune to the Boston condescension. "My brother Mats is driving his camper van up in the morning. They will park right on the ice. He is bringing his accordion. It will be a real party."
Beatrice’s eyes widened slightly, a flash of genuine horror breaking through her manicured mask. "A camper van. With an accordion. How... festive."
Freja leaned forward, her eyes bright and sharp. "Uncle Mats makes the best glögg," she chimed in, grinning at Tatum's mother. "You'll love it, Mrs. Angstrom. It's much better than the champagne they serve at those stuffy golf clubs."
Sloane bristled, her posture stiffening. "Those 'stuffy' clubs have traditions, Freja. They require a certain standard of decorum."
Linnéa laughed, a loud, ringing sound that cut right through Sloane's anxiety. "Traditions are just peer pressure from dead people, Sloane. We prefer making our own."
Then, the ambient noise of the restaurant shifted, and Jordan’s attention snagged on the table directly to their left.
It was the couple from the Icebar.

The woman was wearing a pristine cream-colored ski sweater. She looked radiant, rested, and tragically burdened. The man sat across from her. He looked gray. It wasn't just physical exhaustion; it was the specific, erased posture of a man who was actively disappearing from his own life.

A waiter approached their table, holding a small leather-bound wine list. "Good evening. Can I bring you a bottle to start?"

The man lifted his head, a flicker of genuine relief crossing his face. He reached out to take the list. "Yes, thank you. We'll look at the—"

The woman's manicured hand darted across the table. She didn't grab his wrist. She simply placed her hand over the wine list, blocking him from taking it.

"Oh, no thank you," she said to the waiter, her voice dripping with a syrup of profound, pitying patience. "He's forgotten what the specialist said again. The sulfites give him terrible migraines, and then he gets so confused. He loses track of the evenings completely."

The man's hand froze mid-air. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't even look at the waiter. He just lowered his hand back to his lap, his shoulders sinking another fraction of an inch under the invisible weight of her public curation.

"I don't get confused, Eleanor," the man murmured, staring at the white tablecloth. "I just wanted a glass of red."

"Of course you did, darling," Eleanor cooed, pitching her voice loud enough to ensure the surrounding tables caught the tragedy of her situation. She looked up at the waiter, offering a tight, brave smile that begged for a witness to her martyrdom. "Just sparkling water with lemon for him, please. He struggles so much with the altitude."

The waiter offered a sympathetic nod, poured the water, and quickly retreated.

At the Wreckers' table, the light, vacation-mandated banter died instantly.

Tatum went perfectly, absolutely still. The warmth in her eyes hardened into something sharp and recognizing. She knew that exact, suffocating social gravity. She knew what it felt like to be managed, scheduled, and dismissed until you forgot you had a pulse. Henrik Angstrom had used status-obsessive rigidity; Eleanor was using weaponized pity. The mechanism was different, but the emotional starvation was identical.

Jordan took a slow sip of his bourbon. He tracked the kinetic energy bleeding out of the man, watching him accept a false reality simply because fighting the daily, microscopic humiliations required too much friction.

Eleanor took a delicate sip of her own water. As she set the glass down, she turned her head, her gaze snagging on Tatum's mother,

Beatrice, and then sliding to Vanessa. Recognizing the expensive silk, the tailored clothes, and the quiet sophistication of the women at the next table, Eleanor decided she had found her peers.
She leaned slightly across the spatial divide between the tables, offering Vanessa and Beatrice a conspiratorial, exhausted sigh.
"You have to watch them like toddlers, don't you?" Eleanor whispered, a sad, forced smile playing on her lips. "I brought him up here to rest, but his mind just... wanders. It's a full-time job simply keeping him anchored to reality."
Beatrice offered a polite, uncertain smile, unsure of how to respond to the sudden intimacy.
Vanessa did not blink.
She traced the behavioral loop in a fraction of a second. Eleanor wasn't just erasing her husband; she was addicted to the social currency it bought her. She needed an audience to validate her suffering. She was hoarding the sympathy of strangers while starving the man sitting three feet away from her.
Vanessa smiled. It was a flawless, warm, mirrored response, crafted to match Eleanor's exact frequency. It was also the most dangerous expression Vanessa Smart possessed.
"It must be incredibly taxing for you," Vanessa said, her voice dropping into a low, confiding hum that invited Eleanor deeper into the trap. "Carrying all that weight alone."
Eleanor's eyes lit up with the thrill of being recognized. "It is. Thank you. Someone finally understands." She patted her husband's arm, completely ignoring the fact that he flinched at the contact. "But we do what we must for the ones we love."
Eleanor turned back to her dinner, practically glowing with the fresh supply of validation.
Vanessa's smile vanished the second Eleanor looked away.
The silence at the Wreckers' end of the table was sudden and absolute. The biological families continued to chat, oblivious to the shift, but the vacation was officially dead, killed by the sheer proximity of an ugly, familiar rot.
Linnéa set her fork down, her jaw tight, ready to follow whatever lead was set. Tatum didn't look away from the man's slumped shoulders.
Vanessa picked up her wine glass. She didn't look at Jordan, but she felt his steady, heavy presence beside her, the brakeman waiting for the signal.
"Aiko," Vanessa murmured, keeping her voice pitched just beneath the ambient noise of the restaurant.
Aiko stopped buttering her bread. She looked up, her dark eyes locking onto Vanessa with flat, terrifying attention. "Ma'am."
"The woman in the cream sweater," Vanessa instructed, actively

unraveling the threads of her new target. "I want to know her maiden name, I want to know who manages her trust, and I want a full history of her husband's medical records for the last five years. I specifically want to know if there is a single, verifiable diagnosis for his 'confusion,' or if she simply invented it to keep him on a leash."

Aiko reached down and tapped the screen of her matte-black tablet, which rested silently on her lap. "I will have the baseline data in fourteen minutes."

Jordan shifted his weight, turning his dark, observing gaze toward Vanessa. "I thought we were strictly off the clock. Champagne and cake."

Vanessa met his eyes. The sophisticated hubris of the previous day had burned away, leaving the cold, precise curator of human ruin. She reached across the table and covered Tatum’s hand with her own, a protective, unbreakable gesture.

"Cake is for tomorrow," Vanessa said softly. "Tonight, we open a cage."

Chapter 6

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Six: "The Gold"
The warm, timber-framed bridal suite smelled intensely of roasted birch and the sharp, clean ozone of the arctic air bleeding through the frost-thickened windowpanes. Inside, the massive stone hearth kept the room in a state of sweltering, insulated comfort, utterly defying the hostile darkness two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle.
There were no superstitions observed in this family. No one was sequestered or hidden away before the vows. They occupied the heated space together, a tightly bound ecosystem moving through the final preparations with frictionless, easy grace.
Vanessa Smart stood near the heavy wooden mantle, a flute of champagne held loosely in one hand. She was dressed for the ice chapel in a floor-length gown of heavy, midnight-blue wool, moving with the slow, deliberate confidence of a woman who had curated her reality exactly to her liking. Jordan Harlan stood a few feet away, adjusting the cuffs of a crisp, dark suit cut from thick winter worsted. He watched the room, reading the currents of tension and the kinetic energy bouncing between the heavy timber walls, finding nothing but absolute, unshakable loyalty.
Aiko Nakamura sat at a small pine table in the corner, wearing a sleek, high-collared black dress that managed to look both elegant and entirely tactical. Her matte-black tablet rested flat on the wood in front of her, the screen glowing faintly.
In the center of the room, Tatum Angstrom sat perfectly still.
She wore a beautifully structured, tailored two-piece suit in a soft, elegant cream. It was a garment designed for endurance and grace, wrapping her in a warm, quiet sophistication. Her hair, a rich cascade of dimensional, warm brunette waves, was swept back, exposing the long line of her neck. She looked radiant, grounded, and entirely free.
The heavy wooden door to the adjoining bedroom clicked open.
The low hum of conversation stopped instantly. Jordan lowered his hands from his cuffs. Vanessa took a slow, silent breath.
Linnéa Bergström stepped into the firelight.
She had chosen a gown of heavy, spun winter silk with long, intricately laced sleeves, dropping completely off her shoulders to expose her collarbones and the athletic lines of her back. Her platinum hair was pulled high into a thick, dramatic ponytail that tumbled down her neck. She was wearing heels high enough to make her calves flex, a deliberate choice that brought her compact, gymnast's frame up to look Tatum dead in the eye. She looked like something

carved out of the glacial ice, impossibly bright and vibrating with a fierce, unapologetic energy.
Tatum stood up. She didn't say a word. She just looked at the woman she was about to marry, the anchor holding fast to the spark. The social gravity in the room shifted entirely, all of it pulling directly toward the two of them.
Linnéa offered a wicked, breathless smile, her eyes locking onto Tatum. "I am missing exactly one thing."
Linnéa reached into the pocket of the heavy skirt. She withdrew a thick, slightly frayed ribbon holding a heavy, dull-shining disc.
It was the 1912 Olympic gold medal.
The same medal Tatum had flown to Cairo to secure, orchestrating the erasure of an extortionist's empire to ensure it belonged to the former gymnast who had earned the right to hold it.
Linnéa lifted the ribbon and slipped it over her head. The heavy, antique gold settled against the pristine white silk of her wedding dress. It clashed violently with the traditional aesthetic of a bridal gown. It was heavy, scratched by time, and aggressively loud.
Linnéa smoothed the ribbon with her thumb, her chin lifting as she held Tatum’s gaze.
Tatum’s breath hitched. She reached out, her fingertips brushing the edge of the cold, antique metal resting over Linnéa's heart. She didn't say a word. She didn't have to.
From the corner of the room, the soft, synthetic chime of a completed data compilation broke the silence.
Aiko tapped the screen of her tablet once, sealing the encrypted connection. She stood up, smoothing the front of her black dress, and turned to face the room.
"Ma'am. Sir," Aiko said. The flat, precise delivery cut through the heavy emotional resonance of the room with surgical efficiency. "The data on Eleanor and her husband is compiled."
Vanessa did not sigh or mourn the interruption. She simply turned her head, her mind instantly shifting gears, unraveling the soft atmosphere to make room for the cold data. "Tell me."
Aiko walked toward the center of the room, the tablet resting in the palm of her hand. "Eleanor has spent the last fourteen months methodically suppressing her husband's neurological function. I accessed the pharmacy records and corresponding toxicology requests from his primary physician. She has been filling prescriptions for heavy, conflicting neuro-inhibitors and sedatives, and actively introducing them into his daily intake to artificially mimic advanced cognitive decline."
Jordan went completely still. He read the sheer, calculated brutality of the action, measuring the exact leverage Eleanor was applying to a

man who trusted her to pour his water.
"To what end?" Vanessa asked, her voice dropping into a smooth, dark precision. She began tracing the behavioral loop, isolating Eleanor's endgame. "Why poison him in slow motion?"
"Her husband is the sole signatory and owner of a seventy-thousand-acre land trust," Aiko stated, scrolling the screen. "An ancient, old-growth forest reserve in Lithuania. It is completely untouched. Currently, a large, decentralized community of off-grid artists and naturalists occupy the edges of the property. He allows them to live there. He intends to preserve the sanctuary permanently."
Aiko looked up, her dark eyes entirely unreadable. "Eleanor has filed preliminary paperwork for a medical power of attorney. Once he is declared legally incompetent, she assumes control of the trust."
"And what does she intend to do with seventy thousand acres of ancient forest?" Jordan asked quietly.
"I found a blind LLC registered to her maiden name," Aiko replied. "She has already commissioned topographical surveys and blueprints. She intends to clear-cut the center of the sanctuary. The filings describe a highly exclusive, ultra-elite country club and resort. Manicured lawns. Eighteen holes. Complete removal of the local population."
The temperature in the warm timber suite plummeted.
Tatum’s hand fell away from the gold medal resting on Linnéa’s chest. The blood drained from her face. She recognized the exact, suffocating architecture of what Eleanor was building. She knew the heavy silverware, the manicured lawns, the rigid, status-obsessive terror of a country club that turned living people into furniture.
Eleanor was erasing a man's mind to pave over an ancient forest, all to build the exact cage Tatum had barely escaped.
Jordan felt the kinetic energy in the room snap taut. The social physics altered instantly. There was no hesitation, no calculation of risk. It was a raw, immediate alignment of purpose.
Vanessa stepped forward, the silk of her midnight-blue dress sweeping the floor. She looked at Tatum, her expression a mirror of cold, protective rage.
"We will handle this quietly," Vanessa murmured, her voice a lethal hum. "You two are getting married in an hour. Jordan, Aiko, and I will track them when they leave tomorrow. We can manage the wreck while you take your honeymoon."
"No."
Linnéa’s voice cracked like a whip.
She turned away from Tatum, the heavy gold medal swinging against the winter silk of her dress. Her blue eyes were blazing with a fierce, chaotic fire. She looked at Vanessa, then at Jordan, the kinetic energy

rolling off her in waves.
"They are leaving for the Baltic states tomorrow?" Linnéa demanded.
"Lithuania," Aiko confirmed flatly. "To a private estate on the edge of the reserve."
"Then we are going to Lithuania," Linnéa declared.
She reached out and caught Tatum’s hand, lacing their fingers together in a crushing grip. She didn't look at her bride with pity; she looked at her with the absolute, uncompromising loyalty of someone who understood what it meant to burn a cage to the ground.
"We do not outsource this," Linnéa said, her Swedish accent thick and hard. "She is poisoning a man to build a country club. She is trying to build Boston." Linnéa lifted her chin, staring down the rest of the Wreckers. "We are going on a honeymoon in the woods. And this is my wedding gift. We are taking her apart."
Jordan looked at the blonde woman in the lace-sleeved silk, standing tall in her heels and wearing an antique gold medal like armor. He felt the absolute, unyielding friction of her demand. He turned his head and met Vanessa's eyes.
Vanessa’s lips curved into a slow, devastating smile.
"Very well," Vanessa said softly. "Aiko, route the transport for tomorrow morning. Tonight, we drink champagne and watch our family take their vows. Tomorrow, we go to the forest."

Chapter 7

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Seven: "The Still Point"
Linnéa pushed the heavy cedar door open, and the Arctic night swallowed them whole.
The transition from the sweltering, wood-smoke heat of the bridal suite to the freezing air was a physical shock. It tasted of iron and crushed ice, instantly crisping the edges of Tatum's breath as she stepped out into the dark. The temperature was ten degrees below zero, the sky above them an endless, bruised purple dusted with a spray of violent, glittering stars.
Tatum's fingers were locked in Linnéa's, their palms pressed flush together. She didn't shiver. The heavy cream wool of her tailored suit held the heat of the fire, but it was the woman beside her, vibrating with chaotic, brilliant energy, that kept the cold at bay.
The path to the ice chapel was carved through waist-high snowdrifts, illuminated by dozens of iron torches staked into the ice. The flames snapped and hissed in the biting wind, casting dancing, amber shadows across the frozen landscape.
And then, fifty yards down the path, Tatum saw them.
Standing rigidly near the edge of the torchlight, forming a tight, miserable island of sterile Boston wealth, were Richard, Beatrice, and Sloane Cabot. They were dressed in immaculate, dark cashmere overcoats, their postures painfully rigid, their faces locked in identical masks of polite, freezing endurance. They looked completely alienated, horrified by the elements, and entirely incapable of finding joy in the spectacle.
Tatum slowed her pace, her breath pluming in the air.
For the last seven years, she had hidden behind the name Angstrom. It had been her armor, a legal buffer that kept the suffocating, manicured cage of her family at arm's length. The thought of ever being a Cabot again had filled her with a quiet, creeping dread.
But looking at them now, shivering in the snow, Tatum felt nothing but an absolute, profound liberation. They weren't architects of her misery anymore. They were just cold people in expensive coats.
She realized exactly why she had let the Angstrom name burn away today. She was picking up her maiden name for one final, deliberate act. She was bringing the pristine, bloodless Cabot legacy to the absolute edge of the earth, just so she could bolt it to Linnéa Bergström and drown it in Swedish fire. She was overwriting the cage.
Linnéa squeezed her hand, sensing the shift in her breathing. "Are you alright?"

Tatum tore her eyes away from her parents and looked at her bride. Linnéa's platinum hair caught the torchlight, the heavy antique Cairo gold resting fiercely against the white winter silk of her gown.
"I am exactly where I am supposed to be," Tatum said, the truth of it settling into her bones.
They continued down the path, the crunch of their boots loud against the packed snow. As they neared the massive, translucent blue arches of the ice chapel, the scent of the burning torches mixed with the heavy, intoxicating aroma of cardamom, cinnamon, and boiling red wine.
Uncle Mats had parked his battered, vintage Volvo camper van directly beside the pristine chapel entrance. He stood over a massive cast-iron cauldron, an absolute mountain of a man in a thick, embroidered wool sweater, his silver beard catching the steam of the boiling glögg.
He was currently cornering Sloane Cabot.
"Drink!" Mats boomed, his heavy, joyous laugh echoing into the night as he forced a steaming ceramic mug into Sloane's gloved, terrified hands. "Drink the blood of the earth, skinny boy! It puts fire in the veins!"
Mats had his accordion strapped to his chest, and when he saw Linnéa and Tatum approaching, he unleashed a wild, discordant, triumphant chord that vibrated in Tatum's teeth.
"The Queens of the Ice!" Mats roared, abandoning the cauldron and throwing his massive arms wide. He didn't hug them—he respected the silk and the wool too much—but he bowed deeply, his eyes crinkling with unshed, happy tears. He tilted his head toward the heavy doors as a faint, beautiful melody began to bleed through the ice. "Go. The music is starting. The walls are shaking."
The heavy double doors of the ice chapel were carved from solid blocks of the Torne River. When two tuxedoed staff members pulled them open, the sheer wall of sound and heat that rolled out into the freezing night took Tatum's breath away.
Tucked into a carved, illuminated alcove near the entrance was a string quartet. They were wrapped in heavy velvet cloaks, their bows moving with fierce, synchronized passion. They were not playing Mendelssohn. They were not playing Bach.
They were playing a soaring, orchestral, breathtakingly beautiful arrangement of ABBA's *Dancing Queen*.
Years ago, the very first place Tatum had asked to visit in Stockholm was the ABBA Museum. It had been her first real taste of Linnéa's world, a world of unapologetic, glittering joy. Now, that same joy was being treated like a sacred hymn. Played *adagio* on two violins, a viola, and a cello, the iconic disco melody was transformed into a

sweeping, deeply emotional anthem of triumph.
The chapel itself was packed shoulder-to-shoulder, a vibrant, living ecosystem that refused to be contained. The Swedish contingent had completely devoured the space. Dozens of broad-shouldered Olympians, national-level gymnasts, coaches, and boisterous relatives had entirely ignored the seating arrangements. As the string quartet swelled into the chorus, a low, melodic hum began to ripple through the crowd as the Swedes instinctively hummed along with the strings.
The Cabots had been utterly swallowed. Tatum caught a brief glimpse of Beatrice Cabot pressed against the far wall, her face a mask of aristocratic horror as she realized they were walking down a cathedral aisle to 1970s Swedish pop.
Linnéa grinned, a fierce, feral expression of pure, radiant triumph.
They stepped into the aisle. They didn't walk to a polite march. They walked to the sweeping, regal strings of their own history, surrounded by a rhythmic, deafening thunder. The athletes began stamping their heavy boots against the packed snow floor in time with the cello, creating a booming, primal heartbeat that shook the vaulted ice ceilings. The cheers echoed and compounded, washing over Tatum in a wave of absolute, unadulterated love. Every single moment of it felt meticulously, gloriously right.
Through the glorious chaos, as they neared the massive, glowing ice block of the altar, Tatum found the anchor.
Standing in the second row, just behind Lars and Agneta Bergström, were the Wreckers. Vanessa, Jordan, and Aiko didn't cheer, and they didn't stamp their feet. They stood in perfect, relaxed alignment, a dark, immovable current amidst the riot of color. Vanessa caught Tatum’s eye and offered a slow, fractional nod—an acknowledgment of the vow they had made in the cedar suite, and a silent promise that the future was secured.
They reached the altar. The string quartet drew out the final, sweeping note, letting it hang suspended in the frozen air before it faded into the vaults.
The Swedish magistrate, wrapped in heavy ceremonial robes and wearing a silver chain of office, raised his bare hands.
Slowly, deliberately, the thunderous stomping faded. The cheers dissolved into a thick, expectant silence. The *Ma* settled over the room—a profound, spatial pause where the only sound was the howling of the Arctic wind outside and the collective, held breath of a hundred and fifty people.
"We are standing at the edge of the world," the magistrate began, his voice dropping into the frozen acoustics with perfect, ringing clarity. "In a place carved from the river. It will melt in the spring, but the promises made here will not wash away. Marriage is not a surrender.

It is not an erasure. It is the brave, conscious choice to look at another person and say: *I see your history, I see your fire, and I choose to build a safe harbor for it.*"

The magistrate folded his hands, his expression shifting from orator to witness as he began the formal civil rites. He looked directly at Tatum.

"Tatum Cabot. Do you take Linnéa Bergström to be your lawfully wedded wife, to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?"

The weight of her reclaimed maiden name hung in the air for only a fraction of a second before the sheer force of her answer obliterated it.

"I do," Tatum said. The words didn't waver.

The magistrate turned to Linnéa.

"Linnéa Bergström. Do you take Tatum Cabot to be your lawfully wedded wife, to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?"

Linnéa’s chin lifted, the heavy antique Cairo gold resting over her heart catching the light. "I do."

"Then you may offer your vows," the magistrate instructed quietly, stepping back to give them the space.

Tatum turned fully to Linnéa. She reached out, taking both of Linnéa’s hands. The cold of the room vanished the moment their skin met. Tatum looked at the gold medal, then up into the brilliant, fierce blue of Linnéa’s eyes.

"For a very long time, I thought survival meant taking up no space at all," Tatum said. Her voice carried through the ice cathedral, steady and clear. She wasn't speaking to the room; the room didn't exist. "I thought peace was just the absence of noise. I thought if I stayed perfectly still, nothing could hurt me."

She squeezed Linnéa’s hands, a soft, broken smile touching her lips. "And then you broke into my life. You were loud. You were shameless. You refused to let me disappear. You took my quiet, empty world and you filled it with fire. You gave me the courage to take up space."

Tatum’s voice thickened with the profound weight of the truth. "I promise to always be your safe harbor. I promise to protect your fire. And I promise you, I will never, ever be quiet again."

A tear slipped down Linnéa’s cheek, instantly cooling in the freezing air, but her smile was blinding.

"I have never known how to stop moving," Linnéa whispered. Her thick Swedish accent wrapped around the English words, pulling them close. Her thumbs stroked the back of Tatum’s hands. "I thought if I

stopped, the dark would finally catch me. I was so tired, Tatum. But you are the still point."

Linnéa took a shuddering breath, her eyes locked on Tatum’s. "When the noise is too loud, when the world is spinning too fast, I look at you and the earth stops shaking. You are the only place I have ever wanted to rest. I promise to protect your peace. I promise to fight for our joy. And I promise to choose you, every single day, for the rest of my life."

From the shadows of the second row, Aiko stepped forward. Her movements were utterly silent, devoid of any performative flourish. She simply held out the open velvet box.

Resting on the black velvet were two bands of pure, heavy gold.

Tatum released Linnéa's left hand just long enough to pick up the smaller of the two rings. She met Linnéa's eyes as she slid the warm metal over Linnéa’s knuckle, seating it perfectly in place. It felt like an anchor dropping into deep, quiet water.

Linnéa reached for the second ring. Her hands, usually so precise and explosive with athletic energy, were remarkably gentle as she pushed the gold band onto Tatum’s finger, sealing the vow in physical form.

The magistrate stepped forward, his heavy robes rustling in the quiet. He looked at their joined hands, then up to the congregation.

"You have declared your consent before this gathering," the magistrate proclaimed, his voice rising in joyous, undeniable triumph to fill the massive arches. "You have made your promises to each other, and symbolized them by the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of rings. Therefore, by the authority vested in me, it is my great and absolute honor to present to you, for the very first time, Tatum and Linnéa Cabot-Bergström."

He beamed at them. "You may seal your vows."

Linnéa didn't wait for the echo to fade.

She pulled Tatum in by the lapels of her cream suit, the antique Cairo gold crashing softly against the wool, and kissed her with a fierce, possessive, breathtaking hunger.

Outside, Uncle Mats unleashed a deafening, joyous blast from his accordion. Inside, the string quartet instantly struck up an explosive, impossibly fast rendition of *Waterloo*. The Olympians whistled, the ice floor shook with the thunder of a hundred stamping boots, and the quiet, frozen world shattered into a perfect, riotous celebration.

Chapter 8

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Eight: "The Threshold"
The departure terminal at Kiruna Airport was not built for quiet mornings, and the Swedish national gymnastics team had absolutely no intention of letting the celebration die just because the sun had come up.
The small, functional building smelled of melting snow, damp wool, and stale, terrible coffee. Outside, the tarmac was a blinding expanse of white ice glaring under a pale winter sun. Inside, it was a chaotic, exhausted, deeply happy mess.
Agneta Bergström was passing around a tin of ginger biscuits. Uncle Mats was slumped in a plastic row of chairs, his heavy wool sweater rumpled and his accordion resting on the floor between his snow boots, snoring with a deep, rhythmic rumble that occasionally vibrated the glass.
Tatum stood near the tall windows, holding a paper cup of black coffee, watching the room with a profound sense of peace. She was still wearing her wedding ring. The heavy gold felt solid against her finger, a permanent anchor in the swirling chaos of the terminal.
Aiko Nakamura materialized beside her, moving through the dense crowd of towering athletes with her usual frictionless silence. She wore a tailored black overcoat, her expression utterly composed despite having consumed an impressive amount of champagne the night before.
Linnéa stepped up to join them, her platinum hair pulled back into a messy, elegant knot, wearing a heavy silver parka over a black turtleneck.
"Transit logistics are locked," Aiko murmured, her voice pitched low enough to drown in the surrounding chatter. She slipped a small, unbranded envelope into Linnéa’s pocket. "The flight to Stockholm boards in twenty minutes. From the airport, we transfer directly to the harbor. The luxury ferry to Lithuania departs at dusk."
Aiko looked at Tatum, her dark eyes sharp. "Eleanor and Arthur are confirmed on the first-class deck. Jordan, Vanessa, and I are sharing the adjoining bulkhead. We will handle the physical proximity and the staging. You two are booked in the top-tier penthouse on Deck Twelve. Private elevator access. You are completely isolated from the rot."
"Perfect," Linnéa said, her blue eyes tracking Aiko's calm efficiency. "You lay the trap. We will see you in the woods."
"Enjoy the quiet," Aiko said smoothly, offering a fractional bow of her

head before slipping back into the crowd to find Vanessa and Jordan.
Tatum took a sip of her coffee, her gaze drifting across the terminal. Standing near the farthest gate, looking entirely alienated and desperate to escape, were Richard, Beatrice, and Sloane Cabot. They looked as though they had survived a harrowing hostage situation. Their dark cashmere coats were immaculate, but their faces were drawn tight with exhaustion and the lingering shock of being completely swallowed by the sheer, unadulterated joy of the previous night.
Tatum's grip on her coffee cup tightened slightly. For a fraction of a second, the old, ingrained instinct of the cage flared up—the urge to either brace for impact or turn her back completely.
Linnéa felt the microscopic shift in Tatum's posture. She followed Tatum's gaze to the miserable Boston trio.
A slow, brilliant smile spread across Linnéa's face. She didn't look angry; she looked completely unbothered. She reached out, plucked the paper coffee cup from Tatum's hands, set it on a nearby window ledge, and laced their fingers together.
"Come with me," Linnéa said smoothly.
Tatum let herself be led across the terminal. As they approached the Cabots, Richard stiffened, and Beatrice's eyes darted nervously, bracing for whatever icy dismissal their daughter was about to deliver. But Tatum didn't say a word. Linnéa stepped gracefully in front of her, absorbing the entire interaction.
Linnéa was a global athlete. She had stood on podiums while foreign anthems played. she had smiled through grueling international press junkets, and she knew exactly how to wield high-class diplomacy like a perfectly sharpened blade.
"Richard. Beatrice. Sloane," Linnéa said, her voice warm, melodic, and flawlessly gracious. She didn't offer a hug—she wasn't going to violate her own boundaries—but she extended a hand to Richard with the practiced, unshakeable confidence of a visiting dignitary.
Richard, caught entirely off guard by the sheer polite force of it, shook her hand. "Linnéa. We... we have a flight to catch. Back to Boston."
"I know," Linnéa smiled, a look of profound, genuine sympathy crossing her features. "It was incredibly brave of you to travel so far out of your element. I cannot imagine how overwhelming the cold, the people, and the sheer volume of the celebration must have been for you. You really pushed your limits to be here, and we appreciate the effort."
Beatrice's jaw tightened. She had spent decades mastering passive-aggressive high-society warfare, but she had absolutely no defense against aggressive, blinding sincerity. Linnéa was treating them not as a threat, but as fragile, elderly tourists who had barely survived a

walking tour.
"It was... certainly unique," Beatrice managed, her voice brittle.
"It was a triumph," Linnéa corrected gently, her smile never wavering. "Have a very safe flight home. Get some rest. You both look like you desperately need it."
Linnéa nodded to Sloane, squeezed Tatum's hand, and simply turned away, leaving the Cabots standing in stunned, absolute silence. There was no argument. There was no friction. Linnéa had offered them nothing to push against, effectively rendering them invisible.
Tatum walked beside her wife, a profound, breathless laugh bubbling up in her chest.
"You are terrifying," Tatum murmured as they headed toward their boarding gate.
"I am an athlete," Linnéa corrected with a wicked, sidelong glance. "I know how to shake hands with the losing team."
The flight south to Stockholm was a blur of altitude and the low hum of jet engines. By the time they touched down and transferred to the harbor, the late afternoon sun was already sinking beneath the horizon, casting the icy waters of the Baltic Sea in deep, bruised shades of violet and black.
The massive luxury ferry loomed against the docks like a floating city of steel and glass.
The Wreckers split off the moment they cleared the boarding ramp. Vanessa, Jordan, and Aiko didn't say goodbye; they simply offered a collective, silent nod before vanishing into the crowd toward the first-class lower decks, already slipping into the operational headspace of the wreck.
Tatum and Linnéa were escorted by a white-gloved steward into a private, glass-walled elevator that shot upward, leaving the noise of the casino, the restaurants, and the crowded corridors far below.
The doors opened onto Deck Twelve.
The penthouse suite was sprawling and utterly silent. The walls were lined with dark, polished wood, the center of the room dominated by a massive king bed and a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the dark, sprawling expanse of the Baltic Sea.
The steward placed their bags inside, bowed, and quietly pulled the heavy door shut behind him. The locking mechanism engaged with a heavy, final *click*.
The silence that rushed in to fill the room was absolute. It wasn't the suffocating, sterile quiet of Boston. It was the deep, resonant stillness of total sanctuary.
Linnéa dropped her keycard onto the entryway table. She turned to Tatum, the chaotic, public energy of the terminal completely draining away, leaving only a soft, overwhelming reverence.

Without a word, Linnéa closed the distance between them. She slipped her arms around Tatum’s waist and lifted her effortlessly off her feet. Tatum let out a surprised, soft gasp, her hands instantly catching Linnéa’s shoulders as Linnéa carried her the last three steps over the threshold and into the center of the suite.

Linnéa set her down slowly, letting Tatum slide against her chest until her feet touched the thick carpet. Linnéa kept her arms securely around Tatum’s waist, resting her forehead against Tatum’s. The ship gave a low, powerful shudder beneath their feet as the massive engines engaged, preparing to push them away from the shore.

"We are entirely alone," Linnéa whispered, her breath warm against Tatum's skin.

"We are," Tatum breathed back, letting her hands tangle in the soft hair at the nape of Linnéa’s neck. "My wife."

Linnéa’s eyes darkened, the last traces of the world fading away as she pulled Tatum closer, letting the dark sea carry them out into the night.

Chapter 9

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Nine: "The Dose"
The Baltic Sea was a vast, crushing expanse of black water, but inside the first-class decks of the ferry, the environment was engineered to deny the elements entirely. The corridors were lined with thick, sound-dampening crimson carpets, the air heavily filtered and scented with synthetic sandalwood, and the low, rhythmic thrum of the ship's massive engines was reduced to a soft, expensive purr.
Inside Suite 715, the lights were dimmed.
Aiko Nakamura sat at a polished mahogany desk in the corner. Her matte-black tablet was propped open, a soft, pale blue glow illuminating the sharp angles of her face. She was perfectly still, her dark eyes tracking a series of cascading digital logs.
"Target is anchored," Aiko reported, her voice carrying the flat, frictionless cadence of a machine coming online. "Eleanor has been at the high-stakes baccarat table on Deck Six for forty-two minutes. She just ordered her second gin martini. Her heart rate, monitored via her smartwatch telemetry, is resting at a steady seventy-two beats per minute. She is entirely relaxed. She believes she is completely invisible."
Vanessa Smart stood by the floor-to-ceiling window, looking out at the freezing dark. She was holding a crystal tumbler with two fingers of amber bourbon, the ice long melted. She wore a tailored black silk blouse and dark trousers, the picture of absolute, terrifying curation.
"A keeper is always relaxed when the cage is locked," Vanessa murmured, taking a slow sip of the bourbon. She didn't look away from the glass. "How is the patient?"
"Still in Suite 714," Aiko replied, tapping the screen once. "Room sensors indicate zero movement from the primary bedroom for the last three hours. Ambient temperature is set to seventy-six degrees. The door is deadbolted from the outside. She locked him in."
Jordan Harlan stood near the center of the room. He was dressed in a dark, fitted sweater and dark trousers, moving with the coiled, silent economy of a predator. He checked the matte-black face of his dive watch, then looked up at Vanessa.
"I need six minutes," Jordan said.
Vanessa turned from the window. "Take the balcony."
Jordan moved to the sliding glass door. The instant he pushed it open, the engineered illusion of the luxury ferry vanished. The freezing, violent wind of the Baltic Sea whipped into the suite, carrying the smell of salt, diesel, and deep water.

Jordan stepped out onto the narrow teak deck and slid the glass shut behind him, cutting off the warmth.

The partition separating the balcony of Suite 715 from Suite 714 was a frosted glass privacy screen framed in brushed steel, designed to stop polite tourists, not architects of a wreck. Jordan didn't hesitate. He gripped the steel frame, pulled himself up over the railing, and suspended himself over the freezing, churning black water twelve decks below.

With a quiet, muscular grace, he swung his weight around the partition and dropped silently onto the teak deck of Eleanor’s balcony.

The sliding glass door to 714 was locked. Jordan withdrew a slender, matte-black tension wrench from his pocket. It took him exactly twelve seconds to defeat the locking mechanism.

He slid the door open just enough to slip inside, then closed it softly behind him.

The air inside Suite 714 was stiflingly warm and heavy with the scent of expensive floral perfume layered over something faintly, unpleasantly medicinal. The suite was identical to their own, but it felt entirely different. It didn't feel like a luxury cabin. It felt like a terrarium.

Jordan moved silently across the thick carpet, bypassing the empty living area and stepping into the darkened bedroom.

Arthur lay in the center of the massive king bed.

He was a tall man, his frame visibly thinned beneath the heavy white duvet. His silver hair was damp with sweat, and his skin carried a gray, waxy pallor. But it was his breathing that commanded Jordan’s attention. It was terrifyingly shallow—a slow, labored rattle that barely moved his chest.

Jordan stood at the foot of the bed, looking at the man who owned seventy-thousand acres of wild, ancient forest. Arthur was a conservationist, a man who had dedicated his life to the fierce, chaotic life of the woods, and his wife had reduced him to a heavily breathing prop. He wasn't sleeping. He was medically buried.

Jordan felt the cold, familiar spike of protective rage, but he immediately boxed it away. Emotion made you sloppy. He turned his back on the bed and moved into the en-suite bathroom.

The marble vanity was impeccably clean, save for a leather-bound toiletry bag and a row of amber prescription bottles lined up with meticulous, obsessive precision.

Jordan pulled a small penlight from his pocket, shielding the beam with his palm as he illuminated the labels.

The prescriptions were written in Lithuanian, but the chemical compounds were universal. Lorazepam. Haloperidol. Heavy, conflicting neuro-inhibitors designed to slow cognitive function to a

crawl, creating a flawless, chemically induced mimicry of advanced dementia.
Eleanor was dosing him with the exact cocktail required to keep him pliant, confused, and utterly dependent, keeping him alive just long enough to sign away the land trust before his heart gave out from the strain.
Jordan set the penlight down. From his pocket, he produced two small, unmarked plastic vials.
He unscrewed the caps of Eleanor’s prescriptions. Working with absolute, methodical precision, he emptied the heavy sedatives into a flushable pouch. He then opened his own vials.
Aiko had sourced the generic placebos in Kiruna. They were visually identical to Eleanor's cocktail—the same pale blue tablets, the same scored white ovals—but they were nothing more than mild, over-the-counter acetaminophen. Generic Tylenol.
Jordan filled the amber bottles with the placebos, matching the exact pill count he had removed. He screwed the caps back on and aligned the bottles exactly as he had found them, ensuring the labels faced forward at the precise, obsessive angle Eleanor had left them.
The swap took less than three minutes.
Jordan turned off the penlight, slipped the pouch of real sedatives into his pocket, and walked out of the bathroom. He paused briefly at the edge of the bed, looking down at Arthur’s shallow, rattling chest.
Hang on, Jordan thought. *The cage is open.*
He retreated through the living area, slipped out the sliding glass door, and secured the lock behind him. The freezing Baltic wind hit him again as he swung back over the partition, dropping silently onto his own balcony.
When Jordan stepped back into Suite 715, the quiet, curated calm of the room was exactly as he had left it.
He walked over to the mahogany desk and placed the heavy pouch of real sedatives next to Aiko’s tablet.
Aiko didn't look up from her screen. She simply reached out, tapped a key, and logged the time. "Target is cashing in her chips at the baccarat table," she noted softly. "She is returning to her suite."
Vanessa walked over, her silk blouse catching the low light. She looked down at the pouch of heavy pharmaceuticals, then looked up at Jordan.
"It's done," Jordan said, his voice dropping to a low, steady baseline. "The halflife on those neuro-inhibitors is roughly twelve hours. By the time they reach the estate tomorrow afternoon, his blood will start to clear."
Vanessa picked up her bourbon, a slow, devastating smile touching her lips.

"Then let her sleep well tonight," Vanessa murmured. "Tomorrow, her ghost wakes up."

Chapter 10

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Ten: "Fairy Queens"

The Labanoras Forest did not feel like a place that belonged to the modern world. It was a sprawling, ancient wilderness of towering silver pines and frozen, hidden lakes, where the snow absorbed all sound and the air tasted intensely of crushed pine needles and woodsmoke.
The heavy, studded tires of the Wreckers' black Land Rover crunched rhythmically over the packed snow of the narrow logging road, driving deeper into the seventy-thousand-acre reserve.
Jordan was behind the wheel, navigating the winding, unmarked path with effortless precision. Aiko sat in the front passenger seat, her tablet resting dark on her lap—there was no cell service out here, no digital footprint to track. Vanessa sat in the back with Tatum and Linnéa, watching the ancient, snow-heavy branches sweep past the tinted glass.
They breached the edge of the bohemian settlement just as the late afternoon sun dipped below the tree line, casting the forest in a breathtaking, ethereal twilight of deep violet and silver.
The off-grid community was not a manicured resort. It was a chaotic, beautiful integration of human life and nature. Small, timber-framed cabins with turf roofs were scattered among the trees, their windows glowing with warm, yellow firelight. Colorful prayer flags hung motionless in the freezing air, and the scent of roasting root vegetables and baking bread drifted through the pines.
But it was the structure at the very center of the clearing that took Tatum’s breath away.
It was a massive, geodesic glass dome, built over a natural geothermal vent. The triangular panes of heavy glass were framed in dark, recycled timber. While the forest outside was locked in a brutal, sub-zero freeze, the interior of the dome was a riot of lush, vibrant, emerald-green life. It glowed from within like a cut gemstone, a brilliant, warm amber sanctuary surrounded by miles of hostile winter.
Jordan stopped the Rover at the edge of the clearing and put it in park.
"This is the perimeter," Vanessa said softly, breaking the quiet hum of the engine. She looked at Tatum and Linnéa, her dark eyes reflecting the amber light of the dome. "The estate is three miles east on the private access road. We will establish our baseline there and begin

tracking Eleanor's chemical fade. Your comms are in your bags for absolute emergencies, but otherwise, our network is dark. We will not intrude."
Linnéa reached across the leather seat and squeezed Vanessa's hand. It was a rare, purely emotional gesture of gratitude. "Thank you. For all of it."
Vanessa's lips curved into a warm, deeply genuine smile. "Go be happy. We will handle the rot."
Tatum and Linnéa stepped out of the heavy SUV, pulling their coats tight against the biting cold. They didn't watch the Rover pull away. They turned their backs to the road and walked toward the glowing glass pyramid, the snow crunching loudly beneath their boots.
The bohemian artists of the settlement were profoundly respectful of the woods and the people in it. No one rushed out to greet them. No one asked for autographs or stared at the newlyweds walking through their camp. A few heavily bearded men chopping wood near a communal fire simply paused, smiled, and offered a quiet, reverent bow of their heads before returning to their work.
They reached the heavy timber door of the . Linnéa pushed it open, and they stepped over the threshold.
The transition was staggering.
The air inside the dome was heavily oxygenated, thick with the scent of blooming jasmine, wet earth, and cedar. The geothermal heat radiating from the stone floor instantly melted the frost from their boots. Massive ferns and broad-leafed tropical plants created a lush, vibrant canopy, curving up toward the towering glass ceiling, where the freezing Baltic snow rested harmlessly against the panes.
In the center of the space, elevated on a raised wooden platform, was a massive, sprawling bed covered in thick furs, heavy linen sheets, and goose-down pillows. A cast-iron stove burned quietly in the corner, keeping the ambient temperature at a perfect, sweltering seventy-five degrees.
Resting on a low, live-edge wooden table at the foot of the bed was a welcome gift left by the villagers: a woven basket filled with a round loaf of steaming, freshly baked dark bread, a jar of raw honeycomb, heavily spiced cured meats, and two unlabeled bottles of deep, rich red wine.
Linnéa shrugged off her heavy silver parka, letting it drop to the stone floor. She spun around, her platinum hair catching the warm light, her blue eyes wide as she took in the impossible, lush paradise enclosed in the glass.
"Tatum," Linnéa breathed, her voice filled with sheer, unadulterated wonder.
Tatum unbuttoned her wool coat, feeling the sheer, staggering weight

of her entire life—the sterile expectations of Boston, the terror of her first marriage, the endless running—finally, totally evaporate.
She looked at her wife, standing barefoot on the warm stone amidst the ferns, looking like a wild, untamed forest spirit who had finally found a place vast enough to hold her.
"It's ours," Tatum whispered.
What followed was a series of hours that defied time entirely, a string of perfect, uninterrupted moments that no curated, five-star luxury resort could ever hope to divine.
They didn't unpack. They didn't check their phones. They stripped away the heavy layers of winter travel, shedding the armor of the outside world until there was nothing left but skin and the quiet, breathing heat of the dome.
They ate sitting cross-legged on the massive bed, tearing the warm, dark bread with their bare hands and smearing it with thick, sticky honeycomb. Linnéa opened the dark wine, bypassing the glasses entirely, taking a long, deep pull from the bottle before passing it to Tatum, a drop of the deep red liquid catching on her bottom lip. Tatum leaned forward, her heart hammering against her ribs, and kissed it away, tasting the crushed grapes, the wild honey, and the absolute, feral freedom of the woman she loved.
They made love not with the frantic, desperate energy of survival, but with the slow, devastating reverence of two people who knew exactly how much it cost to earn this peace. The world outside the glass was freezing, howling, and entirely locked out. Inside, there was only the slide of skin against skin, the soft, breathless murmurs of Swedish and English tangling together in the dark, and the brilliant, overwhelming heat of the geothermal earth beneath them.
Hours later, the fire in the stove had burned down to a low, glowing ember.
Tatum lay on her back, the heavy furs pulled up to her waist, bathed in the silver moonlight filtering down through the glass ceiling. Linnéa was sprawled entirely over her, her head resting on Tatum’s bare chest, her long, muscular legs tangled with Tatum’s. Linnéa was asleep, her breathing deep and rhythmic, her chaotic energy finally, beautifully at rest.
Tatum slowly ran her fingers through Linnéa’s platinum hair, looking up at the glass panes above them. The snow was falling heavier now, silently coating the dome, completely burying them in the ancient, magical woods.
For the first time in her life, Tatum Cabot-Bergström didn't have to brace for the morning. She didn't have to defend her space. She had married the fire, and together, they had built the perfect sanctuary.
It was the greatest honeymoon ever divined, and it was only the first

night.

Chapter 11

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Eleven: "The Isolation"

Three miles east of the geodesic glass hemisphere, the ancient, sprawling wilderness of the Labanoras Reserve came to an abrupt, unnatural halt.
The estate was a sprawling fortress of brutalist concrete, black steel, and massive panes of reinforced glass, jutting out of the snow like a jagged tooth. It was surrounded by a ten-foot electrified perimeter fence. It was not a home built to coexist with the forest; it was a structure designed to dominate it, to keep the wild out and the assets securely locked inside.
Half a mile outside that perimeter fence, hidden in the dense canopy of silver pines, the Wreckers had established their blind in an abandoned, snow-covered hunting cabin.
There was no fire in the hearth. The only light came from the pale, blue-white glow of Aiko Nakamura’s dual monitors.
Aiko sat at a weathered wooden table, her fingers moving across the matte-black keyboard with a speed that blurred into a continuous, quiet hum. She was entirely in her element, navigating the shadowy, heavily encrypted architecture of international offshore banking. Vanessa Smart stood behind her, wearing a heavy dark turtleneck, her hands resting lightly on the back of Aiko’s chair.
"Her offshore holding company is housed in the Caymans," Aiko reported, her voice flat and frictionless. "The shell LLC she created to execute the country club development is heavily leveraged. She used her husband's existing real estate portfolio as collateral to secure the demolition crews and the architects, assuming his medical power of attorney would clear probate by the end of the month."
"Hubris," Vanessa murmured softly. "She spent the money before the corpse was cold."
"Precisely," Aiko said. She struck a final key. "I have just introduced a cascading series of randomized, heavily encrypted fraud flags into the Cayman routing numbers. The algorithms triggered an immediate, automated hard-freeze on the accounts. They cannot be accessed, they cannot be transferred, and they cannot be bypassed without her physical presence in a federal banking office in New York."
Jordan leaned against the timber wall near the frosted window, his arms crossed over his chest. "What about the medical power of attorney?"
Aiko’s fingers flew across the keys again, pulling up a secure email

server for a prestigious Boston law firm.
"I am currently inside the inbox of her lead attorney," Aiko said, her dark eyes tracking the scrolling data. "I am permanently deleting the finalized drafts of the power of attorney, wiping the local backups, and sending a spoofed email from the senior partner's account flagging the entire file for an internal ethics review due to severe conflict of interest. The firm will drop her by the end of the business day."
Vanessa smiled—a slow, lethal expression that did not reach her eyes. Eleanor had spent fourteen months slowly isolating her husband from the world, cutting off his communications, his friends, and his physical freedom. The Wreckers were returning the favor. They were building a digital cage around Eleanor, brick by invisible brick.
"Leave her the cell service," Vanessa instructed softly. "I want her to be able to answer the phone when the architects call to tell her the checks bounced."
Aiko tapped the enter key. "The rot is isolated."
Inside the master suite of the brutalist estate, Arthur woke up.
For the last fourteen months, waking up had been a slow, suffocating crawl out of a deep, cotton-thick fog. His thoughts had been fragmented, his memories slippery and obscured by a heavy, gray static that made it impossible to hold onto a single idea for more than a few seconds. He had believed he was dying. He had believed his mind was failing, rotting away from the inside out, exactly as Eleanor and the doctors had gently, tragically explained to him.
But this morning, the static was gone.
Arthur opened his eyes. He didn't just see the ceiling; he saw the razor-sharp intersection of the concrete beams. He heard the faint, rhythmic ticking of the designer wall clock. He felt the exact, rough texture of the heavy linen duvet against his fingertips.
The sheer sensory overload of it made his heart hammer violently against his ribs.
He took a slow, deep breath. His lungs expanded fully. The oppressive, leaden weight that usually anchored him to the mattress was gone. The halflife of the neuro-inhibitors had run its course. Jordan’s placebo swap was complete. The chemical cage had dissolved.
Arthur lay perfectly still, staring at the ceiling as the memories flooded back with agonizing, crystal clarity. He remembered the land trust. He remembered the off-grid artists he had promised to protect. He remembered the taste of the pills Eleanor fed him twice a day, the patronizing, sorrowful stroke of her hand against his hair as she watched him swallow them.
She wasn't mourning me, the realization hit him like a physical blow to the chest. *She was burying me.*
The horror of the betrayal was absolute, but the man lying in the bed

was a survivor of the wild. The panic flared, hot and bright, and then it immediately hardened into a cold, terrifying pragmatism. He was fully lucid, but he was still locked inside her fortress. If she realized he was awake, she would simply call her private doctors and have him injected with something stronger.

To survive, he had to play the ghost.

The heavy, soundproofed door to the master suite clicked open.

Arthur instantly let his facial muscles go slack. He half-closed his eyes, slowing his breathing to the shallow, labored rattle he had been trapped in for a year, letting his hands rest limply on top of the covers.

Eleanor walked into the room.

She looked immaculate. She wore a tailored beige cashmere lounge suit, her hair perfectly styled, radiating the crisp, sterile energy of a woman who was entirely in control of her empire. She carried a small silver tray holding a glass of water and a small porcelain dish. Resting in the dish were two pale blue pills and a scored white oval.

"Good morning, darling," Eleanor cooed. Her voice was pure, sickly-sweet poison. She set the tray on the nightstand and sat on the edge of the bed. She reached out, brushing a lock of silver hair away from his forehead.

Arthur forced himself not to flinch at her touch. For the first time in over a year, he looked into his wife’s eyes and saw the absolute, vacant absence of empathy. He saw the keeper.

"Time for your medicine," Eleanor murmured softly, picking up the small porcelain dish. "Come on. Sit up for me."

Arthur played the part flawlessly. He allowed his movements to be slow, uncoordinated, and trembling as he weakly pushed himself up against the headboard. He let his gaze drift, acting as though he couldn't quite focus on her face.

She pressed the generic Tylenol into his palm.

Arthur brought his trembling hand to his mouth and tipped the pills past his lips. He took the glass of water from her, his fingers deliberately fumbling against the glass, and swallowed.

"There you go," Eleanor smiled, taking the glass back. "You're doing so well. Just rest. The snow is terrible today anyway."

She patted his hand, stood up, and walked out of the room, locking the heavy door behind her.

The moment the lock engaged, Arthur dropped the vacant expression. His eyes hardened into pure, glacial ice. He looked down at his hands. They were no longer trembling.

He was awake. He was in the heart of the cage. And he was going to burn it to the ground.

Chapter 12

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**

Chapter Twelve: "The Revelation"

Morning in the Labanoras Forest did not break; it materialized.

The transition from night to day was a slow, majestic bleeding of pale silver light through the dense canopy of ancient pines. Inside the geodesic glass pyramid, the shift in the light caught the condensation on the heavy ferns, turning the lush, tropical interior into a glittering expanse of emerald and gold.

Tatum woke to the profound, resonant silence of the deep woods and the steady, rhythmic heat of Linnéa's skin against her back.

Linnéa's arm was thrown heavily over Tatum's waist, pulling her flush against the long, athletic line of her body. For several minutes, Tatum didn't move. She just watched the snow resting against the glass ceiling directly above them.

For the first thirty years of her life, Tatum had been trained to be furniture. In the Cabot household, and later in her disastrous first marriage to Henrik Angstrom, her survival had depended entirely on her ability to shrink, to anticipate the anger of her keepers, and to take up absolutely no emotional or physical space. She had lived in a perpetual, exhausting state of bracing for impact.

But lying here in the geothermal warmth, surrounded by seventy thousand acres of trackless, frozen wilderness, the final, lingering ghost of that conditioning evaporated. There was no cage left to shrink from.

Linnéa shifted, pressing a slow, sleep-warm kiss to the curve of Tatum's shoulder.

"You are thinking very loudly," Linnéa murmured, her voice thick and raspy with sleep.

Tatum smiled, turning within the circle of Linnéa's arms so they were face-to-face. "I was just thinking that we should go outside."

Linnéa's blue eyes opened fully, instantly catching the light. The chaotic, feral spark ignited immediately. "Into the ice?"

"Into the wild," Tatum corrected softly.

They left the sweltering sanctuary of the dome thirty minutes later, heavily armored against the brutal Baltic winter. They wore thick, insulated snow pants, heavy wool sweaters, and dense, fur-lined parkas.

The moment they stepped off the cleared path of the bohemian settlement and passed the tree line, the forest swallowed them whole.

The sheer scale of the Labanoras Reserve was staggering. The silver pines towered a hundred feet into the air, their trunks thick and scarred by centuries of wind and ice. The snow beneath their boots was untouched, a pristine, blinding white blanket that absorbed all ambient sound, creating an acoustic vacuum of total, sacred stillness.

They didn't walk on a trail. There were no trails. They simply pushed deeper into the trees.

Linnéa was entirely in her element. She moved through the deep, knee-high snow drifts with the effortless, kinetic grace of an apex predator. She ran ahead, her bright laughter shattering the absolute silence, and leaped onto the trunk of a massive, fallen oak tree. She walked the length of the snow-covered log, her arms extended perfectly for balance, looking like a platinum-haired woodland queen claiming the frost.

Tatum followed at a slower pace, perfectly content to be the anchor to Linnéa’s kite. She watched her wife, feeling an overwhelming surge of fierce, protective devotion.

This is what we are fighting for, Tatum thought. *Not just to stop a hostile development. We are fighting to keep this sanctuary wild enough to hold her.*

They walked for an hour, drifting further away from the settlement until the only sound was the rhythm of their own breathing and the occasional, sharp *crack* of a frozen branch shifting in the canopy overhead.

Eventually, Linnéa dropped back, slipping her heavily gloved hand into Tatum’s. They crested a small, rising ridge of snow and stepped into a wide, perfectly circular clearing.

The canopy parted here, allowing a single, brilliant shaft of pale winter sunlight to pierce the gloom, illuminating the center of the

clearing like a spotlight on an empty stage.

"Look," Linnéa whispered, her voice dropping to a sudden, breathless halt. Her grip on Tatum’s hand tightened like a vise.

Tatum stopped. She followed Linnéa’s gaze across the clearing.

Standing perfectly still in the shadows of the tree line, just at the edge of the golden shaft of light, was a stag.

It was a creature of impossible, terrifying scale. It was a massive European red deer, standing nearly five feet at the shoulder, its thick winter coat a dark, russet brown that looked almost black against the snow. Its antlers were a towering, jagged crown of bone—twelve points, wide and lethal, a physical manifestation of the ancient, violent beauty of the forest.

Tatum’s breath caught in her throat. The animal was an apex herbivore, a king of the woods, and they had just walked directly into its territory.

Instinctively, the old survival programming flared—*don't move, don't breathe, make yourself small.*

But Tatum didn't shrink. She felt the heavy gold of her wedding ring beneath her glove. She felt Linnéa standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her. She was a Wrecker. She was a steward.

Tatum took a slow, deliberate half-step forward into the clearing.

The stag didn't run. It didn't startle.

The massive animal slowly turned its head, bringing its dark, fathomless eyes to lock directly onto Tatum. The air in the clearing seemed to pull taut, vibrating with a profound, electric tension.

It was a moment of absolute, silent communion. The stag was looking at her not as an intruder, and not as prey. It was assessing her. It was weighing the fire in her chest against the ancient, quiet power of the land.

For ten agonizing, beautiful seconds, the world stopped spinning. Tatum looked into the eyes of the wild, and for the first time in her life, she didn't apologize for taking up space. She held the gaze, projecting an aura of absolute, immovable peace.

I see you, Tatum thought, the silent vow ringing in her bones. *I will protect you.*

The stag let out a long, slow breath, twin plumes of white vapor rising from its nostrils into the freezing air. It lowered its massive head in a single, fractional nod of acknowledgment. Then, with a silent, ghostly grace that belied its massive size, it turned and dissolved into the shadows of the pines, vanishing completely.

The heavy, sacred silence rushed back in.

Tatum let out a shaky breath, her heart hammering wildly against her ribs. She felt tears freezing on her eyelashes.

Linnéa turned to her, her blue eyes wide, completely stripped of their usual chaotic fire, replaced by a profound, mystic reverence.

"He wasn't afraid of you," Linnéa whispered, her voice thick with awe. "He knew."

"Knew what?" Tatum asked, her voice barely a breath.

Linnéa reached up, pulling off her heavy glove, and cupped Tatum’s face with her warm, bare hand.

"He knew you are a protector," Linnéa said softly, the absolute certainty of it ringing like a bell in the frozen air. "He knew we are here to keep the cage away from his woods."

Tatum leaned into Linnéa’s hand, the last, lingering weight of Boston and the Cabots shattering into a million pieces and blowing away on the Baltic wind. She was exactly where she belonged.

"Come on," Tatum said, her voice steady and vibrating with a new, quiet power. "Let's go find the people trying to pave this sanctuary."

Chapter 13

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Thirteen: "The Clarity"

Arthur waited until the sharp, rhythmic *click* of Eleanor’s heels faded completely down the long concrete corridor. When he heard the distant, muffled slide of the glass patio doors opening and closing on the ground floor, he finally moved.
He pushed the heavy linen duvet off his chest and swung his legs over the edge of the mattress.
His mind was operating with a terrifying, crystal-clear velocity, but his body was a completely different story. Fourteen months of forced, chemically induced lethargy had exacted a brutal toll. When his bare feet hit the cold hardwood floor and he tried to stand, his knees buckled.
He caught himself against the heavy oak nightstand, his breath hissing through his teeth. His muscles were severely atrophied, shaking violently under his own weight.
You are not a ghost, Arthur told himself, gripping the edge of the wood until his knuckles turned white. *You are a creature of the woods. Stand up.*
He forced his legs to lock. He let go of the nightstand. He stood.
He didn't bother getting dressed yet. He wore only a pair of loose cotton sleep trousers. Moving with excruciating, deliberate slowness, he navigated the master suite, trailing his hand along the wall for balance. He slipped out into the silent, heavily shadowed corridor of the second floor.
The brutalist architecture of his own home had never felt more alien. The poured concrete walls and black steel fixtures felt like the inside of a mausoleum. It was a house Eleanor had designed, a structure built to violently impose order on the wild.
He bypassed the grand staircase and moved toward the south wing, where Eleanor kept her private office.
She hadn't bothered to lock the door. You don't lock doors to keep out a man who can barely remember his own name.
Arthur pushed the door open. The office was immaculate. The massive desk was a slab of pure, polished obsidian, completely clear save for a sleek laptop, a silver pen, and a thick, leather-bound portfolio resting directly in the center.
Arthur braced himself against the edge of the desk. He flipped the portfolio open.
Resting on top was a glossy, oversized architectural rendering.

Arthur stared at it, the blood roaring in his ears. The rendering showed a sprawling, ultra-exclusive country club. There was a massive clubhouse made of imported stone, an eighteen-hole golf course with manicured, emerald-green fairways, and a paved, gated access road.
He looked at the topographical map beneath it. It was his land. It was the exact coordinate grid of the geothermal vent where the bohemian artists had built their glass hemisphere.
Eleanor wasn't just stealing his money. She was going to send bulldozers into the sanctuary. She was going to pave over the ancient pines, evict the artists who had trusted him to protect them, and replace the beating heart of the forest with golf carts and heavy silverware.
She was going to build the ultimate, sterile cage directly on top of his soul.
A sudden, sharp sound shattered the silence of the house.
Arthur flinched, his hand instinctively flattening over the blueprints. It was a cell phone ringing. It was coming from the ground floor, echoing up the open stairwell.
He crept out of the office and moved silently to the glass balustrade overlooking the expansive living room below.
Eleanor was standing near the massive stone fireplace. She had a sleek smartphone pressed to her ear, a crystal glass of sparkling water in her other hand. From his vantage point, Arthur could see the rigid, furious line of her spine.
"What do you mean, an internal ethics review?" Eleanor demanded. Her voice was no longer the sickly-sweet, patronizing tone she used in the bedroom. It was a sharp, venomous hiss. "The medical power of attorney was finalized yesterday. I am looking at the draft on my server."
She paused, listening to the voice on the other end. Her knuckles turned white against her glass.
"Deleted? How is an entire file permanently deleted from a secure firm server?" Eleanor snapped. "I don't care if the senior partner flagged it. Un-flag it. If that document doesn't clear probate by Monday, the collateral on the demolition loans falls through!"
She hung up, throwing the phone onto the leather sofa in a rare, uncalculated burst of pure frustration. She took a deep breath, smoothing the front of her cashmere lounge suit, desperately trying to reassert her pristine control.
Five seconds later, the phone rang again.
Eleanor snatched it up. "What now?"
Arthur watched her face. He saw the exact moment the bottom fell out of her world.
"Frozen?" Eleanor whispered. The fury in her voice instantly dissolved

into a cold, creeping panic. "No, no, that's impossible. Those are blind LLC accounts in the Caymans. They aren't tied to the trust yet."
She set her water glass down on the mantle. Her hand was shaking. "Fraud algorithms? What kind of fraud flags?" Eleanor's voice climbed an octave, echoing off the concrete walls. "I am the sole signatory! You tell the project manager for the architects that the checks are good! Do not let them pull the crews! I will fly to New York on Monday and handle the bank in person."
She killed the call. She stood perfectly still for a long moment, staring blankly at the stone fireplace, the sheer, sudden collapse of her flawless fourteen-month timeline crashing down around her.
Up on the balcony, Arthur stepped back into the shadows.
His heart was hammering, but it wasn't from exertion. It was a profound, adrenaline-soaked realization.
Cayman accounts frozen. Power of attorney deleted from a secure server. Fraud flags.
Arthur was a man of the woods, not a hacker, but he understood the physics of cause and effect. This wasn't a coincidence. This was a highly targeted, surgically precise demolition of Eleanor's assets. Someone had recognized the rot in the forest, and they were actively dismantling it from the outside.
He wasn't fighting this war alone. The woods had guardians.
Arthur retreated silently down the hall, slipping back into the master suite. He didn't go to the bed. He went directly to the back of the massive walk-in closet. He pushed past Eleanor's rows of designer coats and found the heavy, cedar-lined trunk in the back.
He opened it. Inside rested his old, heavy wool sweaters, his insulated thermal pants, and a pair of scuffed, heavily weather-proofed winter boots.
His muscles ached, his lungs burned, and he knew he likely didn't have the stamina to walk more than a mile. But the chemical fog was gone. The cage was breaking. He dressed quickly, the familiar, heavy weight of the winter gear grounding him in reality.
Arthur bypassed the main corridors entirely. He moved to the private balcony off the master bathroom, unlatched the frosted glass door, and stepped out into the freezing Baltic air. There was a wrought-iron maintenance staircase that led directly down into the snow, bypassing the ground-floor security sensors Eleanor had installed to keep him inside.
He gripped the frozen iron railing and began the slow, agonizing descent.
He needed to get into the trees. He needed to find whoever was burning down his wife's empire, and he needed to offer them a match.

Chapter 14

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**

Chapter Fourteen: "The Encounter"

The snow outside the perimeter of the brutalist estate was thigh-deep and completely untouched. For a man who had spent fourteen months medically paralyzed in a seventy-six-degree terrarium, it was a physical gauntlet of agonizing proportions.

Arthur leaned heavily against the scarred bark of a massive silver pine, his chest heaving as his lungs fought to pull the freezing, oxygen-rich air into his withered frame. His legs were shaking violently beneath his heavy thermal pants, the atrophied muscles screaming in protest. He had only made it a half-mile from the house, but the concrete fortress was already completely obscured by the dense, towering canopy of the woods.

He didn't care about the pain. Every ragged breath tasted of crushed pine and ozone, a brilliant, freezing shock to his system that scrubbed the last lingering traces of the chemical static from his mind.

He was alive.

Arthur pushed off the tree, forcing his legs to carry him another ten yards before he heard it.

It wasn't the heavy, mechanical crunch of Eleanor’s security personnel, and it wasn't the slow, methodical tread of a hunter. It was the sound of bright, breathless laughter echoing through the acoustic vacuum of the frozen forest.

Arthur froze, instinctively sinking lower into the shadow of the pines.

Fifty yards away, moving through the dense trees with shocking, kinetic speed, was a woman. She was wrapped in a heavy silver parka, her platinum hair practically blinding against the snow. She wasn't fighting the terrain; she was flowing over it, leaping a fallen log with an explosive, effortless grace that spoke of world-class athleticism.

A moment later, a second woman emerged from the tree line. She wore a dark, heavy wool coat, moving at a slower, more deliberate

pace. Her dark hair was swept back, and her eyes were constantly tracking the canopy, the horizon, and the woman in silver. She didn't look like a tourist who had wandered off the trail. She moved with the quiet, grounded vigilance of a guardian.

Arthur recognized instantly that these women did not belong to Eleanor's sterile, manicured world. They were too vibrant, too wild.

He took a slow step forward, his boot snapping a frozen branch buried in the snow.

The sound cracked like a rifle shot in the quiet woods.

The platinum-haired woman spun instantly, her laughter vanishing as she dropped into a low, balanced stance, her blue eyes locking onto the shadows where Arthur stood. The brunette didn't panic. She simply turned, her posture straightening, completely unafraid, and placed herself shoulder-to-shoulder with her companion.

Arthur held his hands up, palms open, and stepped out from behind the silver pine into the pale winter sunlight.

He knew how he must look—a gaunt, hollowed-out ghost of a man, trembling in an oversized wool sweater, his silver hair wild and damp with sweat.

The brunette stared at him. She didn't shrink back. Her eyes narrowed slightly, processing his face, measuring the gauntness of his cheeks and the fierce, desperate clarity in his eyes. In her mind, she was pulling up a digital dossier compiled by Aiko Nakamura.

Tatum's breath caught. The man in the dossier had been a heavily medicated prop. The man standing in front of her was wide awake.

"Arthur?" Tatum asked, her voice carrying clearly across the snow.

Arthur's hands dropped slowly to his sides. He let out a harsh, rasping breath. "You know my name. But you don't work for my wife. Eleanor's people don't look at the woods the way you do."

Linnéa slowly stood up from her defensive crouch. She looked at Tatum, reading the absolute shock in her wife's eyes, then turned her piercing gaze back to the old man in the snow.

"You are supposed to be heavily sedated," Linnéa stated, her Swedish accent thick and uncompromising. "You are supposed to be locked in

the cage."

Arthur let out a sound that might have been a laugh if his throat hadn't been so raw. "Someone opened the door. I woke up this morning to a clear head and an unlocked office. My wife's offshore accounts are frozen, and her legal paperwork vanished into thin air." He looked between the two of them, the intelligence in his eyes sharp and cutting. "Was that you?"

Tatum closed the distance between them, moving carefully but purposefully, stopping just a few feet away. She looked at Arthur, seeing the exhaustion radiating off him, but also seeing the absolute, unyielding bedrock of a man who refused to be buried.

"My name is Tatum. This is my wife, Linnéa," she said, her voice steady and warm. "We have friends in the shadows. They specialize in dismantling cages."

Arthur stared at her, the reality of it hitting him like a physical blow. He wasn't alone. The forest had answered his silence. "Why?" he asked, his voice cracking. "Why would you do this for a stranger?"

Tatum looked around the massive, ancient trees. She thought of the stag in the clearing, the silent vow she had made to protect this space. She thought of her own fourteen years trapped in a bloodless, performative prison in Boston, slowly being erased by people who claimed to love her.

"Because we know what it looks like when a keeper tries to convince you that shrinking is the only way to survive," Tatum said quietly, looking back into Arthur's eyes. "Eleanor is trying to erase your mind so she can pave over this sanctuary and build a country club. She wants to turn your wild into a manicured lawn."

Arthur’s jaw tightened. The grief of the betrayal flickered in his eyes, instantly consumed by a cold, protective fury.

"She has collateral," Arthur rasped, leaning against a nearby trunk as his legs threatened to give out. "She leveraged my existing real estate to secure the demolition crews. If she gets that medical power of attorney signed, she owns the trust. She’ll evict the artists in the dome. She’ll cut the heart out of these woods."

Linnéa stepped up beside Tatum, folding her arms over her silver parka. She looked at the old conservationist with the fierce, unapologetic respect of a fellow athlete recognizing a fighter.

She thought of the single, encrypted text Aiko had pushed to their secure comms device that morning while they were eating breakfast—a silent, frictionless update proving that the Wreckers were already doing their job.

"She does not have the paperwork," Linnéa said with a wicked, brilliant smile. "It was deleted. And her bank in the Caymans thinks she is running a massive fraud operation. She is currently trapped in a fortress with no money and no legal authority."

"But she still thinks I am a ghost," Arthur said, his mind racing, mapping out the architecture of his own vengeance. "She brought me my pills this morning. I swallowed them, but I swapped them out." He paused, a realization dawning on him. "Wait. If you didn't swap the pills... why did I wake up?"

"Because one of our people walked onto your balcony in the middle of the Baltic Sea last night," Tatum explained softly. "He emptied the neuro-inhibitors into the ocean and replaced them with generic Tylenol. You aren't taking poison anymore, Arthur. You are just taking painkillers."

Arthur closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the rough bark of the pine tree. A single tear slipped down his weathered cheek, freezing instantly in the cold air. The profound, overwhelming weight of the rescue washed over him. He had spent over a year screaming in the dark, entirely silenced, and these strangers had simply walked onto a boat and given him his mind back.

He opened his eyes and looked at Tatum and Linnéa.

"I cannot stay out here for long," Arthur admitted, his voice rough. "My heart can't take the cold yet. I have to go back. I have to get back into the bed and pretend the static is still there."

"Let her believe the illusion," Tatum agreed, recognizing the exact strategy. "Let her panic. Let her exhaust her resources trying to fix the leaks in a sinking ship. We will handle the outside."

"What is the endgame?" Arthur asked, pushing himself off the tree, forcing his posture to straighten. "How do we end this permanently?"

"You own the land, Arthur. As long as you are legally competent, she has nothing," Tatum said. "When the time is right, you just have to stand up and lock the door behind her."

Arthur looked at the two women standing in the snow—the grounded, observant Boston runaway and the chaotic, brilliant Swedish Olympian. They were a force of nature, entirely aligned with the pulse of the ancient reserve.

"I will play the ghost," Arthur vowed, his voice dropping to a low, lethal murmur. "And when the time comes, I will hand you the match."

Chapter 15

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**

Chapter Fifteen: "The Fracture"

The climb up the frozen, wrought-iron maintenance staircase took every reserve of strength Arthur possessed. His lungs burned, his hands were numb inside his heavy gloves, and his vision grayed at the edges as he dragged his atrophied body up to the second-floor balcony.

He slipped through the frosted glass door of the master bathroom, his boots leaving faint, melting rings of snow on the pristine marble floor.

He didn't have time to catch his breath. The sheer, terrifying adrenaline of his encounter with Tatum and Linnéa was the only thing keeping him vertical. He stripped off the heavy wool sweater and the thermal pants, burying them deep beneath the designer coats in the cedar trunk. He shoved the scuffed winter boots into the darkest corner of the closet.

He was wearing only his cotton sleep trousers when he heard the heavy, muffled tread of Eleanor’s heels on the hardwood of the corridor outside.

Arthur threw himself across the master suite and slid under the heavy linen duvet.

His heart was hammering violently against his ribs, his chest heaving. He desperately forced his muscles to go slack, actively suppressing the instinct to pant. He let his head loll to the side, his eyes drifting half-shut, and forced his breathing into the shallow, rattling cadence of the ghost he was supposed to be.

The lock clicked. The heavy door swung inward.

Eleanor walked into the room, and for the first time in fourteen months, Arthur saw the cracks in her pristine armor.

She was still wearing the beige cashmere lounge suit, but it looked rumpled. Her posture, usually a masterclass in rigid, aristocratic control, was tightly coiled with frantic, vibrating anxiety. She was

clutching her smartphone so hard her knuckles were white, and a faint sheen of nervous sweat completely ruined the matte finish of her makeup.

Her empire was burning, and she had absolutely no idea where the fire had started.

She walked over to the bed, not looking at him with the patronizing, sorrowful pity of a grieving wife, but with the cold, calculating assessment of a warden checking an asset.

"Arthur," she snapped, her voice sharp and devoid of the sickly-sweet poison she usually fed him.

Arthur let out a low, confused groan, his eyes rolling blankly before loosely focusing on her face. He allowed his hand to tremble violently as he reached out toward her.

"Eleanor?" he rasped, his voice legitimately wrecked from the freezing air outside, which only added to the authenticity of his performance. "Are you... what is wrong?"

Eleanor flinched slightly, as if his voice was an unwelcome distraction from the catastrophic failure of her offshore accounts. She forced her features to soften, though the smile she pasted on was brittle and terrifyingly hollow.

"Nothing is wrong, darling," she cooed, reaching out to pat his trembling hand. Her skin was ice-cold. "Everything is perfectly fine. You're just confused again. The doctors warned us you would have bad days."

Arthur looked at the woman he had loved, the woman he had trusted to pour his water and share his home, and felt the last remaining tether of his affection cleanly snap. There was no grief left. There was only the cold, hard pragmatism of the wild.

He decided to test the fracture.

"The woods," Arthur mumbled, letting his head roll back against the pillow, staring blankly at the ceiling. "I was dreaming about the woods. The artists in the glass dome... they need the land trust. Did we... did we secure the trust, Eleanor?"

Eleanor's hand jerked away from his.

For a fraction of a second, raw, unadulterated venom flashed across her face. The mention of the land trust—the exact asset she was currently losing her mind over trying to steal—was like a physical blow.

"Yes, Arthur," she lied, her voice dropping into a tight, breathless hiss. "The trust is safe. The trees are safe. The artists are exactly where they belong. You don't need to worry your failing mind about the paperwork anymore. I am handling all of it."

She was going to bulldoze his sanctuary, evict his people, and pave over the heart of his world, and she was promising him its safety while looking him dead in the eye.

Suddenly, the smartphone in her hand vibrated violently.

Eleanor gasped, snatching the phone up to look at the screen. Arthur, peering through the slits of his half-closed eyes, saw the caller ID flash briefly. It was her lead architect in London.

"I have to take this," Eleanor said abruptly, entirely abandoning the performance of the loving wife. She didn't stroke his hair. She didn't tell him to rest. She simply turned her back on him and practically ran toward the door.

"Tell them... tell them the checks will clear by Monday," she hissed into the phone as she crossed the threshold. "Do not pull the demolition crews, do you hear me? If you pull the crews, you breach the contract!"

She slammed the heavy door shut behind her, the deadbolt engaging with a heavy, final *click*.

The seventy-six-degree terrarium fell completely silent.

Arthur lay in the center of the massive king bed. He stopped trembling. His breathing slowed from the ragged, shallow rattle into a deep, steady rhythm that filled his lungs with oxygen. He turned his head and looked at the locked door.

Eleanor thought she was the keeper. She thought he was a dying, mindless bird locked in a cage, entirely dependent on her for survival.

But Arthur had just been outside. He had stood in the snow with the architects of her ruin. He had seen the absolute, feral fire in Linnéa's eyes, and he had heard the quiet, immovable promise in Tatum's

voice.

His wife was trapped in a concrete fortress with no money, no legal authority, and no idea that the predators were already inside the wire.

Arthur closed his eyes, a slow, dark smile touching his weathered face for the first time in over a year.

Run, Eleanor, he thought, settling comfortably into the heavy linen sheets. *The woods are awake.*

Chapter 16

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Sixteen: "The Analog Shift"
In the shadowy, freezing interior of the abandoned hunting cabin, the only light came from the cool, sterile glow of Aiko Nakamura’s monitors.
It was mid-afternoon, but the heavy winter clouds had already plunged the Labanoras Forest into a deep, bruised twilight. Inside the cabin, the Wreckers were executing a flawless, synchronized digital strangulation.
"She is panicking," Aiko stated, her voice as smooth and frictionless as glass. Her dark eyes tracked a cascading column of red text on her left monitor. "Ten minutes ago, Eleanor attempted to wire two hundred thousand dollars to her London architects from a secondary private wealth account in Zurich. The transaction was flagged and blocked by our algorithms. Three minutes ago, she attempted to charter a private Gulfstream out of Vilnius directly to Teterboro, New York."
Vanessa Smart leaned against the heavy timber frame of the window, a cup of black coffee warming her hands. She wore a dark wool coat over her turtleneck, completely unbothered by the ambient cold of the cabin. "And?"
"She tried to secure the jet with her American Express Centurion card," Aiko replied, a ghost of a smirk touching the corner of her mouth. "I routed the authorization request through the Cayman fraud flags. The card was declined. So was her Platinum Visa. So was her emergency corporate Mastercard."
Jordan stood by the unlit hearth, methodically checking the action on his matte-black Sig Sauer. He didn't intend to use it—the Wreckers operated with scalpels, not hammers—but walking into a desperate billionaire's fortress required a certain level of absolute preparation.
"She is completely cut off from the global financial network," Jordan said, sliding the magazine home with a sharp, satisfying *click*. "She has no money, no flights, and no lawyers. What does a keeper do when the digital cage collapses?"
Vanessa took a slow sip of her coffee, her eyes fixed on the snow-heavy pines outside. "She goes analog. She falls back on the only asset she physically controls. Arthur."
Right on cue, Aiko’s right monitor chimed with a soft, synthetic alert.
"You called it," Aiko murmured, her fingers flying across the keyboard to intercept the outgoing data packet. "Eleanor has abandoned the medical power of attorney strategy. She just accessed a local hard drive on her office computer. She is printing a standardized, hardcopy

Quitclaim Deed. It legally transfers full ownership of the seventy-thousand-acre trust directly into her name."
"A piece of paper means nothing without a notary and a lucid signature," Jordan pointed out.
"Which is why she just placed a cellular call to a man named Tomas Varnas," Aiko continued, pulling up a digital dossier with surgical speed. "He is a local, highly corrupt private notary in Vilnius. She offered him fifty thousand euros in cash from her personal estate safe to drive out here tonight and stamp the document. She intends to force Arthur to sign it on camera, under duress, and have Varnas legalize the theft."
The atmosphere in the cabin shifted instantly. The slow, methodical poisoning of Eleanor’s empire was over. The endgame had arrived.
Vanessa set her coffee cup down on the windowsill. Her dark eyes were completely devoid of mercy.
"Jordan," Vanessa commanded softly, her voice dropping into a lethal, commanding register. "Tomas Varnas does not reach the estate. Intercept him on the access road. Secure him, seize his notary seal, and send him back to Vilnius."
"Consider him gone," Jordan said, already pulling his heavy tactical parka over his shoulders.
Vanessa turned to Aiko. "Send the ping to the dome. It is time for Tatum and Linnéa to move. We breach at dusk."
Three miles away, deep in the heart of the bohemian settlement, the geodesic glass dome was a sweltering, emerald-green paradise.
Tatum and Linnéa were sitting cross-legged on the heavy furs of the massive bed, a topographical map of the Labanoras Reserve spread out between them. Tatum was tracing the boundary lines of the ancient forest, marveling at the sheer scale of the sanctuary they were currently fighting to protect, when the heavy silence was broken by a single, sharp vibration.
Tatum’s secure comms device, resting on the live-edge wooden table, flashed with a single green light.
Linnéa stopped tracing the map. The chaotic, feral energy that usually rolled off her in waves instantly condensed into a laser-focused, razor-sharp stillness. She was an Olympian standing at the edge of the mat, waiting for the whistle.
Tatum reached over and picked up the device. The message was entirely text, stripped of all metadata, and completely untraceable.
The keeper is cornered. She is attempting a physical transfer of the deed tonight. We breach at dusk.
Tatum read the words twice. The heavy, lingering warmth of their perfect honeymoon receded, replaced by the cold, familiar architecture of the Wreckers' operational mindset. She looked up at

her wife.
"Eleanor is making a move on Arthur," Tatum said quietly. "She's trying to force his hand tonight."
Linnéa didn't hesitate. She didn't mourn the interruption of their sanctuary. She simply stood up, the heavy winter silk of her lounge clothes pooling around her feet, and walked over to the chair where her heavy silver parka and insulated snow pants were draped.
"Then we go to the fortress," Linnéa said, her blue eyes catching the amber light of the geothermal stove. It was the look of a woman who had spent her entire life collecting gold medals, now focusing all of that absolute, unyielding drive on the destruction of a single enemy.
Tatum stood up and began to dress, pulling the heavy, dark wool of her own winter gear over her shoulders.
She remembered the suffocating terror of her years in Boston, the way the Cabots and Henrik Angstrom had used paperwork and quiet, polite threats to keep her locked in a performative box. She knew exactly what Eleanor was doing. A desperate keeper was the most dangerous kind, capable of profound physical cruelty when their control was threatened.
But Eleanor didn't know that Arthur was awake. And she certainly didn't know that the woods were full of wolves.
Linnéa zipped her silver parka up to her chin. She crossed the warm stone floor, reached out, and caught Tatum’s face between her heavily gloved hands.
"No more shrinking," Linnéa whispered fiercely, leaning in to press her forehead against Tatum’s. "We walk in there, and we take up all the space."
"All of it," Tatum promised, her heart hammering with a steady, powerful rhythm that had absolutely nothing to do with fear.
They stepped out of the sweltering, lush heat of the dome and back into the freezing, darkening woods. They didn't walk toward the road to wait for a vehicle. They turned their faces toward the concrete fortress hidden in the trees, and they began to march.

Chapter 17

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**

Chapter Seventeen: "The Breach"

The private access road leading to the reserve estate was a narrow, treacherous ribbon of black ice cutting through the dense silver pines.

Tomas Varnas drove a heavy, late-model Mercedes SUV, his knuckles white on the leather steering wheel as he navigated the dark curves. He was a man who traded in quiet, comfortable corruption—forging signatures, backdating deeds, and stamping away the lives of desperate people for a premium fee. He liked his offices warm and his risks low. Eleanor’s frantic, fifty-thousand-euro offer had been enough to drag him out into the Baltic freeze, but the oppressive, towering darkness of the Labanoras Reserve was making him deeply uneasy.

He rounded a sharp bend, the high beams of the Mercedes cutting through the falling snow.

Varnas slammed on the brakes. The heavy SUV fishtailed violently on the ice, the anti-lock brakes stuttering before the vehicle finally shuddered to a halt, inches from a wall of matte-black steel.

The Wreckers' Land Rover was parked completely horizontally across the narrow road, a massive, immovable barricade. Its headlights were off.

Varnas fumbled for the gearshift to throw it into reverse, his heart spiking into his throat.

A sharp, heavy *tap-tap* hit the driver’s side glass.

Varnas jerked his head around. Standing in the freezing dark, entirely unfazed by the sub-zero wind, was Jordan Harlan. He was wearing a heavy tactical parka, his posture perfectly relaxed, one hand resting casually in his pocket. He didn't look like a highwayman; he looked like an executioner who had already checked the math.

Jordan tapped the glass again, making a slow, circular motion with his finger. *Roll it down.*

Trembling, Varnas lowered the window three inches. The freezing air rushed into the heated cabin.

"The road is closed," Jordan said. His voice was calm, conversational, and absolutely terrifying.

"I... I am expected at the estate," Varnas stammered, trying to project an authority he didn't feel. "I am an officer of the court in Vilnius."

"You are a very expensive rubber stamp," Jordan corrected smoothly. He reached into his coat and produced a thick, manila envelope. He slid it through the three-inch gap in the window, dropping it onto Varnas's lap. "That is a meticulously detailed, hard-copy ledger of every forged property transfer you have notarized in the last six years. It includes banking routing numbers and the names of the elderly clients you helped defraud."

Varnas stared at the envelope as if it were a live grenade. All the blood drained from his face.

"Now," Jordan murmured, leaning in slightly closer to the glass. "You are going to hand me your official notary seal. And then you are going to put this car in reverse, drive very slowly back to Vilnius, and forget you ever heard the name Eleanor. If you ever set foot in these woods again, that ledger gets emailed directly to the Lithuanian federal police."

Varnas didn't hesitate. His hands were shaking so badly he could barely manage the clasps on his leather briefcase. He pulled out the heavy, steel notary embosser and shoved it through the window into Jordan’s waiting hand.

"Good choice," Jordan said. He stepped back from the vehicle, vanishing instantly into the shadows of the pines.

Inside the master suite of the concrete fortress, Eleanor was losing the final threads of her composure.

The massive house was entirely silent, but the silence no longer felt like control. It felt like a vacuum. She paced the length of the hardwood floor at the foot of the king bed, her phone gripped tightly in her hand. It was twenty minutes past dusk. Tomas Varnas was late.

Arthur lay in the bed, his breathing a shallow, labored rattle, his eyes closed. He was playing the ghost flawlessly, feeling the frantic, vibrating energy of his wife bouncing off the concrete walls.

Eleanor stopped pacing. She looked down at the hardcopy Quitclaim Deed resting on the oak nightstand, next to a heavy silver fountain pen. She couldn't wait for Varnas anymore. She needed the signature now. If the Caymans were frozen, she needed physical possession of the asset before the banks opened on Monday.

She walked around the bed and grabbed Arthur by the shoulder of his sleep shirt.

She didn't use the gentle, patronizing touch she had employed for fourteen months. She yanked him violently upward, her manicured nails digging into his collarbone.

"Wake up," Eleanor hissed, her voice stripped of all pretense, revealing the cold, reptilian panic underneath. "Wake up, Arthur. Look at me."

Arthur let his head loll to the side, maintaining the illusion of absolute, drug-addled weakness. He offered a low, confused groan, his eyes fluttering open to stare blankly at her chest.

"You are going to sign a piece of paper," Eleanor commanded, dragging him forward until he was slumped against the headboard. She reached for the silver pen, uncapping it with her teeth, and shoved it into his trembling hand. She slapped the Quitclaim Deed down on his lap. "Sign on the line, Arthur. Do it now."

Arthur let the pen slip from his fingers, tumbling onto the heavy linen duvet. "Eleanor... my hands..." he mumbled weakly.

"Pick it up!" she screamed, the pristine mask shattering completely.

Before she could force the pen back into his hand, the room plunged into absolute, pitch-black darkness.

The low, rhythmic thrum of the house's central heating system died instantly. The faint hum of the electrified perimeter fence vanished. The fortress had been entirely severed from the grid.

Eleanor gasped, taking a reflexive step back from the bed. "What..."

She scrambled for her phone, turning on the flashlight. The harsh, white beam cut through the dark, illuminating Arthur’s slumped form. He hadn't moved, but in the stark, unforgiving light of the LED, the shadows on his face made him look ancient and terrifying.

Click.

The sound was faint, but in the dead silence of the powerless house, it was unmistakable. It came from the ground floor.

The heavy, biometric locks on the front doors, which required a retinal scan and a keypad code to open, had simply unlatched.

Eleanor’s breath hitched in her throat. She abandoned Arthur, sprinting to the bedroom door. She threw the deadbolt and pressed her ear against the heavy, soundproofed wood.

For a moment, there was nothing. And then she heard it.

Footsteps.

They weren't sneaking. They weren't the quiet, cautious steps of burglars. It was the synchronized, deliberate sound of multiple people walking into her home with the absolute, terrifying confidence of owners.

Down in the foyer, Vanessa Smart stepped over the threshold, her dark coat sweeping behind her. Aiko Nakamura flanked her, a mobile decryption rig strapped to her wrist, its screen glowing faintly in the dark.

Behind them, moving in perfect tandem, were Tatum and Linnéa.

Tatum looked at the soaring, poured-concrete walls and the sterile black steel fixtures. She recognized the architecture of a cage. She took a slow, deep breath, letting the freezing Baltic air flood her lungs, and felt an overwhelming, immovable sense of power.

Linnéa reached out and caught Tatum’s hand. The antique 1912 Olympic gold medal swung heavy against Linnéa's chest as she looked up toward the shadowed second-floor balcony.

"We do not knock," Linnéa murmured, her voice carrying up the open stairwell like a promise.

"No," Tatum agreed, her grip tightening on her wife's hand. "We tear it down."

Upstairs, Eleanor stumbled backward away from the master suite door, her phone shaking wildly in her hand. She was trapped in the dark with a dying man, and the ghosts had just walked through her front door.

Arthur lay against the headboard, listening to his wife's ragged, terrified breathing. Slowly, deliberately, in the pitch black of the room, he stopped pretending to tremble.

He sat up straight, turning his head toward the door, and waited for the Wreckers to open the cage.

Chapter 18

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Eighteen: "The Match"

The footsteps ascending the concrete staircase were not hurried. They were measured, synchronized, and terrifyingly deliberate.
Inside the pitch-black master suite, Eleanor backed away from the locked door, the beam of her smartphone flashlight shaking violently in her hand. She retreated until her spine hit the reinforced glass of the balcony doors. She was trapped in her own fortress.
"I am calling the police," Eleanor shouted, her voice shrill, bouncing off the poured-concrete walls. Her thumbs flew across the screen of her phone, dialing the European emergency number.
She pressed the phone to her ear. There was no ring. There was no dial tone. There was only dead, digitized static. Aiko Nakamura had blanketed the estate's coordinates with a military-grade cellular jammer the moment they stepped through the front door.
The footsteps stopped right outside the master suite.
Eleanor held her breath, the flashlight beam trembling on the heavy brass handle. She had thrown the manual deadbolt. The door was solid oak, reinforced with steel.
Clack. Hiss. Click.
It took Aiko Nakamura exactly four seconds to bypass the manual override. The heavy deadbolt slid back with a smooth, metallic thud. The door swung open.
Aiko stepped into the room first. She didn't use a flashlight. She carried a high-lumen, omnidirectional tactical lantern. She set it gently on the floor near the doorway and tapped the power switch. The room instantly flooded with a blinding, clinical white light, entirely vaporizing the shadows Eleanor was trying to hide in.
Vanessa Smart walked in next. She moved with the fluid, devastating elegance of a predator with a cornered meal. She didn't look at Arthur in the bed; her dark, merciless eyes locked immediately onto Eleanor.
Behind Vanessa, filling the doorway, were Tatum and Linnéa.
Eleanor raised her hand to shield her eyes from the glare of the lantern. She looked at the four women standing in her bedroom and felt a cold, abyssal terror open up in her stomach. They weren't wearing ski masks. They weren't armed with weapons. They were wearing tailored wool and heavy silver parkas, and they looked at her with absolute, unadulterated contempt.
"Who are you?" Eleanor demanded, trying desperately to summon the imperious authority of a billionaire. "You are trespassing on private

property. Get out of my house."
Vanessa smiled. It was a slow, terrifying expression.
"Your house?" Vanessa murmured, her voice a low, melodic hum in the quiet room. "You don't own a house, Eleanor. The demolition loans defaulted two hours ago. The Caymans locked your accounts. The law firm in Boston purged your files to avoid an indictment."
Vanessa took a slow step forward. "You don't own anything. You are just a woman standing in a concrete box, holding a worthless piece of paper."
Eleanor's eyes darted wildly, the sheer scale of the ambush finally short-circuiting her pristine mind. She looked at the hardcopy Quitclaim Deed resting on the nightstand.
"Tomas," Eleanor breathed, her mind scrambling for the last remaining life raft. "Tomas is on his way. He is an officer of the court. When he gets here—"
"Tomas is currently driving backward toward Vilnius, praying we don't send his ledger to the federal police," a deep, calm voice interrupted from the hallway.
Jordan Harlan stepped into the light, brushing a dusting of Baltic snow from the shoulders of his tactical parka. He held up a heavy, steel notary embosser. He tossed it casually onto the hardwood floor, where it rolled and clattered to a stop at Eleanor's feet.
Eleanor stared at the embosser, her chest heaving. The last pillar of her empire had just snapped. But she was a keeper, and keepers always fell back on their cages.
"It doesn't matter!" Eleanor shrieked, pointing a shaking, manicured finger at the bed. "He is my husband! I have medical authority! He is not competent! Even if you stop the demolition, he is a vegetable! I am his guardian, and I will keep him locked in this room until his heart stops beating!"
Tatum stepped forward.
She didn't look at Eleanor with anger. She looked at her with the profound, heavy pity of someone who had survived the exact psychological violence Eleanor was wielding. Tatum felt Linnéa standing directly behind her shoulder—a massive, radiating heat source of Swedish fire and absolute support.
Tatum didn't shrink. She took up all the space in the room.
"You don't have a bird in a cage, Eleanor," Tatum said, her voice steady, clear, and vibrating with an immovable power. She sounded exactly like the ancient, sacred stillness of the woods. "You just built a very expensive wall around a wolf."
Eleanor let out a sharp, incredulous laugh. "A wolf? He can't even hold a pen!"
"Arthur," Tatum said softly, not taking her eyes off Eleanor. "I believe

it is time."
The shallow, rattling breathing from the bed stopped.
Eleanor froze.
The heavy linen duvet was thrown back. Arthur swung his legs over the side of the mattress. He didn't tremble. He didn't groan. He planted his bare feet firmly on the cold hardwood floor, gripped the edge of the nightstand, and pushed himself up.
He stood tall, his shoulders pulled back, his chest expanding fully as he drew in a deep, lung-filling breath of the cool air bleeding in from the hallway. The waxy, gray pallor of the heavily medicated ghost was completely gone. In the stark light of the tactical lantern, his eyes were sharp, lucid, and burning with a cold, glacial fury.
Eleanor dropped her phone. It hit the floor with a sharp crack, the screen shattering.
"Arthur?" Eleanor whispered, all the blood draining from her face. She pressed her back so hard against the glass doors she thought they might break. "How... you took the pills. I watched you swallow them..."
"I swallowed generic Tylenol, Eleanor," Arthur said. His voice wasn't a raspy whisper anymore. It was a deep, resonant baritone that carried the absolute, unyielding authority of the man who had bought the Labanoras Reserve forty years ago. "Your neuro-inhibitors are at the bottom of the Baltic Sea."
Arthur walked slowly around the edge of the bed. He stopped two feet away from his wife.
He looked down at the woman who had slowly, methodically tried to erase his mind for fourteen months. He saw the terror in her eyes, the pathetic, shivering realization that she was entirely out of moves.
Arthur reached out and picked up the hardcopy Quitclaim Deed from the nightstand. He picked up the heavy silver fountain pen.
Eleanor let out a broken, desperate sob, a pathetic glimmer of hope flaring in her chest. "Arthur, please. The trust..."
Arthur looked her dead in the eye. He didn't sign the paper. He gripped the thick parchment in both hands and ripped it straight down the middle.
He dropped the torn halves onto the floor, right next to the stolen notary seal.
"The trust belongs to the forest," Arthur said, his voice dropping to a lethal, unforgiving calm. "And you are no longer welcome in my woods."
Arthur turned his back on her, a complete and final dismissal, and looked at Tatum and Linnéa. The old conservationist offered them a deep, slow nod of profound respect.
He had just struck the match, and the cage was completely in ashes.

Chapter 19

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**

Chapter Nineteen: "The Guardians"

The removal of Eleanor from the Labanoras Reserve was not violent, and it was not loud. The Wreckers did not deal in theatrical revenge; they dealt in absolute, frictionless efficiency.

Vanessa Smart gave the shivering, shattered woman exactly ten minutes to pack a single suitcase of personal clothing. There were no negotiations. There were no tearful goodbyes. Jordan escorted Eleanor down the concrete stairs, out into the freezing Baltic night, and put her in the back of the Land Rover. He was going to drive her to a three-star motel on the outskirts of Vilnius, leaving her with a burner phone and exactly enough cash to buy a commercial coach ticket back to Boston.

Aiko tapped a sequence into her decryption rig, and the brutalist estate's power instantly surged back online. The lights flickered, the heat kicked on, and the heavy, mechanical hum of the house returned. But the oppressive, sterile weight of the cage was gone.

Arthur stood in the center of the master suite, listening to the sound of the Land Rover's engine fading down the icy access road.

He looked down at his hands. They were steady. He looked at Tatum and Linnéa, who stood quietly near the doorway, offering him the profound respect of silence as he reclaimed his space.

"I have spent fourteen months buried alive in this room," Arthur said, his deep voice carrying a rough, exhausted edge, but underscored by a bedrock of pure relief. He walked over to the reinforced glass doors and pushed them wide open, letting the sub-zero wind whip into the seventy-six-degree terrarium. "I need to clean my house. I need to let the winter freeze the rot out of the concrete."

He turned back to them, offering a small, deeply genuine smile. "Go back to the dome. Rest. Come find me in the settlement tomorrow at noon."

The next morning, the sky over the Baltic Sea was a brilliant, blinding blue, completely devoid of clouds.

Tatum and Linnéa woke late, luxuriating in the profound, sweltering peace of the geodesic dome. When they finally dressed and stepped through the heavy timber doors, leaving their emerald-green sanctuary behind, the freezing air tasted of crushed pine and woodsmoke. The snow in the bohemian settlement glittered like crushed diamonds under the pale winter sun.

They walked toward the center of the camp, where a massive communal fire pit roared, the flames snapping high into the cold air.

Sitting on a heavy, carved log near the fire, surrounded by the off-grid artists, was Arthur.

The transformation in the man was staggering. He wasn't wearing sleep trousers or a designer lounge suit. He wore his heavy, cedar-scented wool sweater and scuffed winter boots. His silver hair was brushed back, and his face, though still gaunt, was flushed with the vibrant, undeniable color of a man who had just taken his life back. He was holding a steaming ceramic mug of cardamom coffee, laughing at a joke one of the bearded wood-carvers had just made.

When he saw Tatum and Linnéa approach, Arthur set his mug down on a nearby stump and stood up. The villagers immediately recognized the shift in the dynamic. They offered quiet, reverent nods to the two women before respectfully dispersing to the edges of the settlement, giving them the space.

"You look like a man of the woods," Linnéa said, her blue eyes shining with fierce approval.

"I slept with the balcony doors wide open," Arthur replied, his voice booming warmly in the acoustic vacuum of the snowy clearing. "It was ten degrees below zero in my bedroom. It was the best sleep I have had in two years."

He gestured to the heavy log bench across from him. "Sit with me."

Tatum and Linnéa sat down. The intense heat of the communal fire radiated against their heavy wool coats, pushing back the Baltic freeze.

Arthur didn't reach for his coffee. He reached into the deep pocket of his wool sweater and pulled out a thick, legal-sized manila envelope. It was sealed with a heavy stamp of red wax.

He placed it directly on the flat stump between them, his weathered

hand resting lightly on top of it.

"I bought the Labanoras Reserve forty years ago," Arthur began, his tone shifting from conversational to something deeply profound and sacred. "I bought it to keep the bulldozers out. I built a perimeter, and I invited these artists here to live in the center of it, thinking that my money and my name would be enough of a shield to protect them."

He looked at Tatum, his dark eyes locking onto hers.

"But yesterday, I realized the fatal flaw in my design," Arthur said softly. "I built a sanctuary, but I didn't cultivate a pack. I was just one old man in a concrete box. When I fell, there was no one standing between the trees and the keepers. The wild doesn't need a single owner, Tatum. It needs guardians."

Tatum’s breath hitched. She looked at the sealed envelope, a sudden, overwhelming suspicion blooming in her chest.

Arthur slid the envelope across the stump until it rested directly in front of her.

"At six o'clock this morning, I used a satellite phone to wake up my personal attorney in Vilnius," Arthur stated, his voice ringing with absolute, immovable clarity. "He is a man who actually respects the law. I had him draft an irrevocable transfer of the Labanoras Forest Trust. It is notarized, it is filed with the federal magistrate, and it is bulletproof."

Linnéa sat perfectly still, the chaotic energy completely draining from her body, replaced by a staggering, breathless awe.

"Transfer to who?" Tatum whispered, her hands trembling slightly as she reached out to touch the heavy parchment.

"To you," Arthur said.

The word dropped into the freezing air like a physical weight.

"The deed, the seventy thousand acres, the geothermal vent, the timber rights, everything," Arthur continued, his eyes shining with unshed tears of absolute gratitude. "I am stepping down as the sole trustee. I am placing the sanctuary in the hands of the two women who walked into the dark and burned my cage to the ground."

"Arthur..." Tatum choked out, the sheer, impossible scale of the gift

completely overwhelming her. "We didn't do this for payment. We just wanted to stop her. This is your home."

"And I will stay here until the earth takes me back," Arthur smiled, a deep, peaceful expression settling over his weathered face. "But it is no longer my empire. You fought for these woods when they belonged to a stranger, Tatum. I can only imagine how fiercely you will protect them now that they are your own."

Arthur stood up from the log. He reached out and placed his hand briefly, gently, over Tatum’s, pressing her fingers against the thick envelope.

"Take up the space," Arthur commanded softly. "Keep the cages away from our woods."

With a final, deep nod to Linnéa, the old conservationist turned and walked away from the fire, stepping back into the brilliant white of the Baltic morning, leaving them entirely alone with the weight of the world.

"To you," Arthur said.

The word dropped into the freezing air like a physical weight.

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With a final, deep nod to Linnéa, the old conservationist turned and walked away from the fire, stepping back into the brilliant white of the Baltic morning, leaving them entirely alone with the weight of the world.

Tatum sat paralyzed, staring at the envelope.

For thirty years, she had been an accessory in Boston. She had been Henrik Angstrom's silent, terrified wife. She had run across oceans just to find a room where she could breathe without asking permission.

And now, resting beneath her fingertips, was the deed to an empire of wild space.

Linnéa slid closer on the log. The Olympic gold medalist wrapped her strong, athletic arms around Tatum’s shoulders, pulling her flush against her side. Linnéa buried her face in the dark hair at the curve of Tatum’s neck, breathing in the scent of cedar and woodsmoke.

"Look at what you built," Linnéa whispered fiercely, her thick Swedish accent vibrating against Tatum's skin. "Look at how loud you are."

Tatum reached up, her fingers tangling tightly into Linnéa’s platinum hair. She closed her eyes, the tears finally spilling over her lashes, hot and fast. She wasn't crying from fear, and she wasn't crying from survival. She was crying because she had finally, permanently, arrived.

She opened her eyes, looking past the communal fire and out into the towering, endless expanse of the silver pines.

It was a kingdom entirely devoid of walls. It was wild, it was freezing, and it was vast enough to hold a fire that would never be put out.

It was theirs.

Chapter 20

The Wreckers Book #22 **[The Melt]**
Chapter Twenty: "The Target"

The departure was warm and entirely unhurried.
Inside the sweltering, lush heat of the geodesic glass dome, bags were zipped and waiting by the door. The frantic, high-stakes energy of the past few days had completely evaporated, leaving behind only the deep, resonant peace of the ancient forest and the quiet comfort of a found family.
Tatum stood near the live-edge wooden table, her fingers resting lightly on the heavy, wax-sealed envelope. She looked at Vanessa Smart, who was casually buttoning her dark wool coat.
"Vanessa," Tatum started, the sheer weight of the seventy-thousand acres still making her voice catch slightly. "About the deed... you all did the heavy lifting here. I feel like this gift—"
"If you finish that sentence, I will have Aiko freeze your credit cards," Vanessa interrupted, though her dark eyes were shining with genuine, profound warmth.
Vanessa closed the distance between them and squeezed Tatum's hands.
"I am one million percent thrilled this belongs to you, Tatum," Vanessa said softly, her voice completely clear and devoid of any edge. "Watching you take this space, knowing you will protect it with the same fire you used to save yourself? That is exactly why we do this. I couldn't be happier. Do not insult my joy by shrinking away from it."
Tatum let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding, a brilliant smile breaking across her face. "Thank you. For all of it."
"You're family," Jordan said from the doorway, pulling a thick knit beanie over his ears. He offered Tatum a quiet, grounded smile. "You never have to thank us."
Aiko Nakamura stepped up beside Vanessa, slipping her tablet into her satchel.
"I'll handle getting all of your things moved from the Stockholm apartment to the forest," Aiko said, her voice entirely light and casual. "I can just hire a couple of guys with a moving truck, box up your winter clothes and the rest of your things, and have it driven out here by mid-week. Super easy, really no big deal."
Vanessa paused, her hands freezing on the top button of her coat. She turned her head slowly, looking at Aiko with one perfectly arched eyebrow, a smarmy, devastating smirk touching her lips.
"Excuse me?" Vanessa drawled. "What happened to all your espionage-

speak? Not playing James Bond anymore?"
Aiko turned to Vanessa. A slow, rare smile broke across her sharp features, completely transforming her face and bringing a soft, bright spark to her dark eyes.
"Target acquired," Aiko said smoothly.
She leaned in and pressed a lingering, affectionate kiss to Vanessa's cheek.
Vanessa let out a rich, musical laugh, catching Aiko's hand and lacing their fingers together.
They didn't drag out the goodbye. There was no need. They all knew they would be seeing each other again soon, whether it was for a quiet dinner in the city or another wild run through the snow. They offered a final round of warm smiles and tight hugs before stepping out through the heavy timber doors, leaving Tatum and Linnéa alone.
The dome fell quiet.
The profound, heavy stillness of the woods rushed back in, wrapping around the glass like a protective embrace.
Linnéa, who had been watching the exchange with a bright, beautiful smile, walked slowly across the warm stone floor. She didn't say a word as she slipped her arms around Tatum's waist from behind, pulling Tatum flush against her chest.
Tatum leaned back into the solid, rhythmic heat of her wife's body, resting her hands over Linnéa's. Together, they looked past the lush ferns, through the massive glass panels, and out into their trackless, freezing, fiercely protected home.
Linnéa rested her chin on Tatum's shoulder, her breath warming the curve of Tatum's neck.
"And the best wedding gift was..." Linnéa prompted, her voice a soft, teasing rumble in the quiet room.
Tatum smiled. She thought of the heavy, sterile silence of Boston, the performative cages she had survived, and the absolute, unyielding freedom of the woman holding her now. She turned her head, her lips brushing against Linnéa's jawline.
"The matches."

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